

AAHP
AIDS Activist History Project

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Interviewee:	Penny Pattison
Interviewers:	Alexis Shotwell & Gary Kinsman
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Persons present: Penny Pattison – PP
Alexis Shotwell – AS
Gary Kinsman – GK

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

AS: So, I always say at the beginning of the tapes that it's February 5th, we're in Montreal, and we're talking to Penny Pattison.

GK: And the way we start off the interviews with is basically, when you first heard about AIDS. What do you remember hearing?

PP: Mid-80s... Yeah, mid-80s and none of the information was very clear or helpful and it was a very, you know, really frightening situation that nobody seemed to be able to clarify. And then everyone was feeling terrified.

AS: You were here in Montreal?

PP: Yeah, and I remember I was probably writing at the *McGill Daily*, which is kind of like, their lefty student paper. We ran a feature on it pretty early on, maybe '86? Just because the feeling was it's out there and it's a killer and nobody knows what's going on. And people need more information to make empowered, informed decisions. That would have been the first time.

AS: So, you were at university then?

PP: Oh god, I was eighteen or something. Yeah.

AS: Amazing.

GK: Okay, what were the sources of information around AIDS then for you at that point, before you get involved in anything?

PP: I mean definitely at that moment, channels that came through like, the Associated Press, the student press. Shortly after I became involved with the Montreal political community, so there were definitely smaller press like, magazines and papers. Certainly not through any kind of official medical, scientific, governmental channel, none of the agencies that you would want to help keep you informed. It was all very much community-based, underground stuff.

GK: So, there's a shift from recognizing that AIDS and HIV is happening to realizing that it's actually something you can organize around. Do you remember hearing about AIDS activism, perhaps from the United States?

PP: Definitely, I would say Montreal was slower to have an organized response, certainly much more so than cities like New York or San Francisco or even Toronto. For the most part when we started organizing, and Réaction SIDA started organizing just a few months before the conference, and largely – although, not entirely but largely – in response to the fact that this conference was happening in our town. We could see the need to have alternative voices and participation in Montreal. And so, there weren't a lot of organized channels in the city before that to connect with. It congealed in the months leading up to that conference.

AS: But, were you already connected? Were you a lefty? Were you an anarchist? How were you politically situated?

PP: Well, I'd been a part of the anarchist collective at the Café Commune for a few years before that went down. And then I was working at Librairie Alternative, which was the anarchist bookstore, so I was a collective member at the time. Yeah, a lot of information filtered through the bookstore. Obviously, we had a lot of papers and zines, and it was a really good conduit for alternative news sources.

GK: So, one of the questions we usually ask people is given that most people had political or activist experiences of other sorts before they get involved in AIDS activism, what do you think that might have brought with it for you when you got involved in AIDS activism?

PP: Definitely, there was a community that I was a part of that was interested in forming a response to the lack of information and government action around the health crisis. I would say we were very young and very new and still really learning about HIV and AIDS at that time, and we were really learning as we went. And definitely, as the group grew and became more diverse, and people from different aspects of investment came to it they all brought something with them. But, it was really learning as we went, and I would say that maybe what previous experience brought to that is just the ability to engage in activism and have channels that we found effective, and resources of... spaces to meet and do outreach.

AS: I think that there's something that's quite amazing about having that felt understanding when you run something like the Librairie as a longtime successful collective... Well, fairly long, right?

PP: [laughter] I would not say it was a financially successful venture. Even as a non-profit it had a lot of troubles sustaining itself and staying afloat. I mean the left at that time in Montreal was a very fragmented community to try to work in. It was really challenging.

AS: So that's interesting. There were these spaces that you could access that were... Like, you would meet in the Collective Commune?

PP: The group... There was OSBL.

AS: What's that?

PP: Organismes sans but lucratif... basically a non-profit entity that was comprised by the very early members of the bookstore that had purchased the building that it was in. And so it was a fluctuating ongoing collective that was responsible for ownership and managing that space, and at the time the ground floor was a commercial space that was rented out. The second floor was the bookstore, and then the third floor was often given to community organizations for different kinds of meetings and activities. And so it was on the third floor that we would have our meetings.

GK: Do you remember when the first meeting would have happened? I mean not a specific date, no.

PP: Spring of '89.

GK: What was the relationship between the first meeting and the murder of Joe Rose?

PP: Well, after Joe got murdered there were definitely protests in the Village and people coming together to mourn and respond to the homophobia and the violence, and the lack of police response. I think it was at one of those demonstrations that Karen announced that we were going to have a meeting for anyone that was interested in organizing specifically around AIDS activism. I would say that was the most concrete connection.

GK: Do you think you were at that first meeting?

PP: Oh, the first meeting of Réaction SIDA? Yes, of course I was.

GK: Do you want to tell us a little bit about it?

PP: Let's see, there was Karen and me and Karl, who were all collective members of the bookstore at the time. And so we organized the meeting in the space, and our wider circle of friends and colleagues who were inclined to put their energy there came out. And then, also, a lot of people who either were at the demonstration... There were people there who we were definitely seeing for the first time and meeting for the first time, and it was a pretty diverse group of people. Certainly, not all coming from the left or coming from a background of political organization. Windi was also at that meeting, Windi Earthworm, and I suspect he was also pretty key in getting out the word that we were going to meet. It's funny because I was trying to think like, how did those people find us? How did we get together? Did we poster? Like, we didn't really have a whole lot of channels. How did we actually get people to come out to that space? I suspect Windi. Windi spent a lot of time downtown and did a lot of talking to different people on the street. And there were people that I got to know later that really didn't have any connection to anyone else. And I would also say, in some ways Windi was also like that. He was never really one to belong to groups and organize in that manner, so I suspect he probably told a few people about it.

AS: How as Windi connected? How did he get involved? Friends?

PP: A friend. Yeah.

GK: Do you want to tell us a bit about Windi Earthworm?

PP: Windi was amazing... I remember before I ever even moved to Montreal, seeing him perform on the street. I think it was in a Metro station. I was probably fifteen and just here visiting, and being in the metro and seeing this performance of this really longhaired... I think he was wearing a dress at the time... Not particularly feminine or trying to be effeminate or being in, you know, what a lot of us would think of as drag... But singing a Nina Hagen song, walking around with his guitar surrounded by police and making it a point of antagonizing all the of cops, and going up and like, whispering in their ears while he's performing and singing to them, and he had a pretty big crowd around. I remember being very impressed by that memory, and then meeting him years later. He was a lovely guy. Lovely guy. But like I said, he was not one who was particularly interested in being part of a political group. He was his own person. But that being said he'd talk to anybody on the street. So, in some ways, he did a lot more outreach than organized groups would have. He talked to all kinds of people and spent a lot of time on lower St-Laurent.

AS: So, just kind of organically organizing and connecting. Sometimes that kind of work is just really central actually to how groups come together, and how people feel connected and it's so invisible. It's so hard to trace and remember because it's not the treasurer of the group, or it's not facilitator of an organization, but that's really important.

PP: Mhmm.

GK: So, let's go back to the founding meeting.

AS: How many people were there?

PP: I would say around thirty.

AS: Amazing!

PP: Yeah, it was a good response. And, like I said, a lot of new faces and a lot of people we were meeting for the first time. It was great. There was a lot of energy around it, obviously, a lot of outrage as well; and a lot of people who hadn't worked in collective situations before, or worked with others particularly before, so those were some organizational challenges. [laughter] I remember at the first meeting there was a reporter from the *Gazette* who was asked to leave.

AS: How were they asked to leave? Did they identify as a reporter?

PP: They did. And we kind of talked about it. We asked them to leave so we could discuss how people felt about it, and at that point we realized that we wanted the ability to define ourselves and set our own agenda and determine for ourselves just how public we wanted that to be. We especially wanted to leave space for people to be open about being [HIV] positive if that was their situation, and not have to come out to the media! [laughter] So, we wanted it to be like, a safe space before opening up to any kind of outside scrutiny. Even though, like I said, a lot of us were

meeting each other for the first time. So yeah, they were asked to leave. I mean, we later had contact with the media, but it was a bit more organized and it was at our choosing.

AS: Not the very first meeting of a new organization.

PP: Yeah, it was a bit too much. So there was a really interesting mix of people. Like I said, some people from the left who knew each other and had been working together previously. Some were friends, some were coming out of alternative media, some were club boys from the Village; there were some friends of Joe's, some were just, I think kind of pre-queer queers, who didn't necessarily strongly identify or hang out in the Village; they were more gothy... Like, purple hair, you know, more like punks that probably wouldn't have called themselves queer at the time, but that would probably be how we would identify them now. And there were people who were doing sex work, and there were people who were positive. There were several people who were positive at the first meeting.

GK: What did Réaction SIDA see as its project? What was it trying to do?

PP: Well, I think it was two-fold. I think we wanted to have our own response to our own political agencies. We wanted to make demands of the Quebec government, of the Ministry of Health. We wanted to have a response, we wanted them to take some initiative and acknowledge that this crisis was going on, and form a response that was not trying to scapegoat any populations, like so much of the mainstream media had done. And we also knew that this conference was coming up quickly and that we needed to have a response to that. We needed to be able to mediate all the activists who would be coming and have them understand the political context within Quebec at the time too and be able to engage.

AS: Can you say a little bit about what that context was?

PP: I mean it was '89, so it was really at the height of [the movement for Quebec] sovereignty. That coloured everything in Quebec, it was hugely important and it really framed how you conducted yourself politically. It was really important that meetings were conducted in French and English, and that there was translation and that people understood the political context of Quebec within Canada, within North America. Also, still harkening from the Quiet Revolution days, in a lot of ways the infrastructure worked very differently than it did in other places in Canada, and certainly than it did in North America at large. And so if you were just coming in as a tourist from another city, or an activist, briefly, you're really not aware of a lot of this.

AS: I lived here from '93 to '96 and I remember just being shocked at how much I had no clue at all. You know, it really was true that if you were not in Quebec in that moment and living here, that people coming from outside had no idea.

GK: It sounds like there are two things that come together for Réaction SIDA from your description. One is a focus on the Quebec government, and then there's this conference coming and you've got to get going and organized. In that context how did Réaction SIDA make decisions? Was it a consensus based decision-making system, or do you have any

memories of how decisions got made, or how the group as a whole was organized? Did it have working groups?

PP: We tried to function as much as possible as a collective. Definitely, there were things that we differed on and splintered over. You know, for example, people that wanted to work with the mainstream media or work with the police to engage in things like sensitivity training, and other people who were really opposed to that tactic. But, in the life span of Réaction SIDA, it was a short-lived group. It didn't have a long life span and, like I said, it really crystalized around the AIDS conference, and I think everyone recognized the urgency and the importance of that, and that was our focus. In that context, it was clear that people were invested for different reasons and had different skills and areas where they wanted to put their energy and how they were going to respond to it. And as much as possible we tried to be accommodating and inclusive so that we could have a shared response.

GK: From the period of the formation of Réaction SIDA to the conference, do you have any memory of things that happened during that time?

PP: We definitely had several demonstrations before the conference. I know we had a protest outside of the prison, Parthenais Prison. We at one point, I think, had a protest outside of City Hall. We were making demands to the Health Minister. This might be a vague memory; you might want to fact check this. This was another area where I think we had some differences. I have this memory, and I think it was Réaction SIDA, where someone wanted to burn an effigy of the Health Minister at the time, who was a woman. And the women in the group were like, "Dude, you cannot be burning effigies of women. That is just not okay." So, I remember that maybe being a point of contention. [laughter]

AS: What was the protest about at the prison?

PP: Just that the prison population was particularly at risk and they were getting no health care, no access to condoms, you know? Not only were they not getting health care, but they weren't getting information on how to take care of themselves. And then no access to things that could help them prevent becoming positive, so it felt really dire for them.

GK: Do you have any idea what the action at City Hall might have been about?

PP: I think it might have been when the Health Minister was in town. If I remember correctly, which I'm not sure I do.

AS: A lot of these factual things, there are documents that we can look at. But, the sense of it or how it felt is another thing.

PP: Oh yeah, I remember this. I think this was after the conference. There was, at the time, a television show on CBC hosted by Dennis Trudeau and it was like, a town hall kind of thing, and they did one on AIDS and we were on it. I was on it along with Gordon, who was also a member of Réaction SIDA. We were representing Réaction SIDA and Sven Robinson was there, and that was

about it from people who wanted to speak from an activist point of view. And then there were just a lot of people – professionals – who had very conservative ideas about how things should be managed and resources should be allocated. Like, even then it was still very shocking how much fear mongering and ignorance was the prevailing mentality.

AS: But Réaction SIDA had a profile that was sufficient, a big enough profile that the CBC would have been like, “Will someone from your group come and be on this show?”

PP: Yeah. I mean especially during the conference—that made world headlines. And we were the only existing Montreal AIDS activist group at the time.

AS: It is amazing to have pulled that together.

PP: It is amazing that we pulled it together. We were not that many people. We were really young, we were not that experienced as activists.

AS: Were most people like you, under twenty?

PP: We were all young and we were for the most part anarchist punks. And trying to coordinate everyone coming out from New York, from Toronto, from New Zealand... You know, a lot of these groups were just a lot more sophisticated and organized and had been together longer. It was kind of a miracle that we pulled it off and accomplished as much as we did.

GK: So, maybe moving more towards the conference. Do you have any memories of the liaison work that would have happened with AIDS ACTION NOW!, and then with ACT UP New York City? I mean there are other activists around, but those were the major groups.

PP: They had the most delegates, those two groups, for sure. We had been in touch with members of both of those groups and we had secured kind of like a headquarters, and a call number and a check-in number. And we were focusing on billeting people, making sure they had places to stay, making sure they could navigate through the city, making sure they had like, a rudimentary introduction to how to conduct yourself in the city... And we had meetings every morning and every day once people did start arriving and got settled—strategy meetings every day of the conference. Who was going to go where, who was going to get access to which people speaking, or disrupt which events were going on. So, there were people within the conference, people who were protesting outside of the conference, people who were trying to talk to people who were presenting at the conference and connect with them, and press releases. At the end of every day we would meet as a space and give a run down, and every morning we would meet and set an agenda. So, it was really happening quite quickly.

AS: So intense.

PP: It was a very intense time.

GK: Do you have any memory of how the activist space on Parc worked?

PP: That space is part of a co-op that has existed in Montreal since the '70s, and it's always kind of been a dynamic community space. There've been a lot of different groups that have used it over the years. I don't recall specifically who in the co-op we dealt with to get access to it, but they were great about giving it to us for the duration of the conference.

GK: It was a really good space. So, let's move ahead to the conference itself happening. There's a whole bunch of stuff that happens, but obviously one of the important things is what happens at the opening session. Do you have any memories of that? It was quite fun!

PP: Yes! One thing I remember being very impressed with was the sophistication of a lot of the people working within ACT UP and AIDS ACTION NOW! Particularly, within hours of being here people had secured fake press passes and had colour photocopied and plasticized and Xeroxed passes for everyone. You know, being completely barred from this medical conference where if you weren't a delegate who was invited it was like, \$500 a head to get in to attend. It was just so exclusive.

AS: \$500 in 1989 dollars.

PP: We were excluded. Everyone who had a vested interest in being on the inside of that conference was expressly excluded from being so. So, to watch them finagle this magic and everybody got it, it was really great. It was thrilling. It was really fun to be able to go in and shut it down, and have the opening keynote address basically be replaced with activists demanding a place at the table, demanding a voice in the procedure, was fantastic. It was great. It was a really exciting time.

GK: Yes, it was quite fun.

AS: In some of the videos – we talked to John Greyson – those posters that came from Toronto that say, *The World is Sick...* Will you describe what it felt like to be there in that moment? There was a rally outside and then you all moved inside.

PP: Mhmm.

AS: Will you just talk us through that?

GK: And AIDS ACTION NOW! thought that the rally outside was all that was going to happen.

AS: What did Réaction SIDA think?

PP: I mean, it was a gamble, you know? And nobody knew what was going to happen. And the fact that we go all the way in, banners unfurled, and people took the stage... I mean, I think the conference organizers weren't expecting this at all. It wasn't like it had a lot of security. I don't even know that a lot of them were aware of the degree to which they had been excluding people who wanted access. You know, like I said, it was an international conference. There were people

coming to Montreal for the first time from relatively small countries giving reports on how things were unfolding for them. They weren't necessarily connected to the North American activist situation. A lot of people from strictly medical backgrounds, they weren't really involved in the political discourse of the time, so I think they were just really surprised and caught off guard and, you know, interested. Many of them were interested. And I think it really kind of shifted the discourse that took place at the conference, and then hopefully in the future as well, about how people approached their research and their policy-making and their education.

AS: Were you one of the people who took the stage?

PP: I was at the foot of the stage. I was not on the stage.

AS: What did that feel like?

PP: It was really exhilarating. It was a giant fancy conference room. It was like being at the UN or something. [laughter] And I'm sure we looked like we did not belong at the World Medical Conference. We definitely stood out from the crowd. I'm sure we all had hair colours from the crayon box, and were wearing combat boots and rags. [laughter] Yeah. But, it was great. And then, I think, everyone was also kind of like, "Wow! That happened! What next? What are we going to do next?" And, like I said, it was really day-to-day. What can we accomplish? What can we do? People finding each other, and different voices emerging; definitely there was a really strong presence from New Zealand. I don't know if you met any of those people. They were *really* organized around sex work, around needle exchange. They had functional ongoing needle exchanges that existed. And we were just like, "Wow, you guys are light years ahead of anyone else in North America." No one, and certainly not with government money, was doing that kind of work here. There was no harm reduction groundwork that was even done yet. So it was really inspiring just to see what was possible, what people were doing in other places, and how really outspoken women in the sex trade were, who were just really resetting ideas. I mean so many working women were really getting scapegoated with as though they were the problem, and for them to be able to focus on the fact that they were doing so much work in sex education and setting the agenda. They were really part of the solution. It was really good for a lot of those voices to emerge and for people to meet each other.

GK: Do you remember any of the other activist things that happened during the week?

PP: I know we had a big benefit one night at Foufounes [Électriques], which is a punk bar down on St-Catherine, not that far from the Palais des Congrès. It still exists.

AS: It was a benefit for Réaction SIDA?

PP: Yes.

AS: Like, a dance?

PP: No. There were two sides. One was more of a concert venue where there were shows and people performing, and a few members of Réaction SIDA got up on stage and performed. Maybe Windi? I don't know about that. People definitely said things and talked a bit about the group; what our goals were, who we were, our objectives. And then on the other side, which was more of a quieter bar side, I think we were screening safe sex videos that people had brought up. Definitely, ACT UP had brought some videos that we screened. I want to say maybe Bruce LaBruce had something in there as well. They were very sexy, porny, and educational... [laughter] But, they were fun and then it was also a time for people to be able to socialize after such crazy, intense days organizing.

AS: Was Foufounes queer-organized then?

PP: Foufounes was just always very switchy. It was like, the alternative punk venue in the city and they were open to a lot of different things. The administration was pretty cool. I think we also had a benefit at Concordia at one point on the seventh floor of the Hall Building. Tracy. Do you remember Tracy from Toronto? Her band was called Mourning Sickness.

GK: Tracy Tief, yeah.

PP: She performed there solo, and a couple of other people. It was pretty spontaneous. I think she had like, a boom box and a mic. I think I emceed it, and there were maybe 50 people.

GK: Do you remember anything else during that week that happened? I mean the plan was to focus on different issues on different days, so like anonymous testing was one day. And at most of those things there would be speakers from AIDS ACTION NOW!, ACT UP New York City, and Réaction SIDA. I know that Eric Smith spoke at the anonymous testing day, but then there was, I think, a sex worker day... There was the Montreal Manifesto or international day, and I have a vague memory that there was some sort of specific Quebec-based action on maybe the Friday. Do you have any memory of that?

PP: I remember most of the sex workers attending the conference were staying at my house, and I remember on that day... I think the conference itself would also sort of have these posh buffets and schmoozy social times after the day, and I think they actually went to one of those with the intention of working it, and having the free buffet. [laughter]

AS: That sounds promising.

PP: I don't remember what we did for the Quebec-based day. I don't recall. But everyday it was like a new thing. And then it was trying to speak to the media and seeing what the media actually decided to write about. And then every morning getting all the papers and all the broadcasts and clipping everything and posting everything. I think you guys actually have a lot of those articles from that time.

GK: We have some. We need to get more. Do you remember that Tiananmen Square happened in the middle of all that?

PP: Oh, I do! I specifically remember we were at McGill, I think, in an auditorium. We got access to... maybe it was the Stephen Leacock Building? I remember being in an auditorium and someone making the announcement the morning that it happened. And it was devastating. It was terrifying and devastating. I mean at that time there were so many things going on in the world. You know, there were so many different pockets of pretty radical resistance happening, and so to see yourself as just another part of all of these things happening together. I mean, that was just devastating. But, I do think we definitely had this feeling that... The way that the mainstream media would talk about AIDS at the time as being a gay plague, and the amount of inactivity in response to it, it felt very deliberate. I felt like it was part of some horrific right-wing agenda that there was this terrible thing happening to the people that we had loved. You know, it was fags and hookers and junkies and prisoners and people of colour. And it seemed like it united us in this way that we wouldn't have previously considered ourselves united, because it was also very clear that it wasn't science setting the agenda. It wasn't a scientific, medical response the way that you would see it now happening to SARS or any of the influenzas and the panicked urgency with which it's reported about and dealt with. It was something that was met with dead silence and it felt intentional. And it felt like the only people that were going to deal with it was us, and we needed to come up with our own systems of informing each other and protecting each other and taking care of each other, because it wasn't going to come from the government. It was scary times all around, you know? People were dying. People were dying really quickly. There were also a lot of bright lights, beautiful moments that we experienced amidst all the fear and grief.

GK: Do you remember anything else about the activism during the conference?

PP: It was very chaotic, for sure. There were definitely tensions with people coming in from out of town, which we addressed. We definitely felt a little bit steamrolled. We felt...

AS: Yeah, there would have been some really powerful personalities from all of those places.

PP: ... and a lot of loud guys who were used to being heard, and with a lot of access. There were times when we felt a little steamrolled by them and just kind of, losing track of what the agenda was and who was going to set the agenda, and who was calling the shots. We were adamant about remaining a collection of people that tried to work together and respect one another. Even if we didn't always successfully function as a collective, that was definitely the goal. So, we had to have some conversations about that. But, at the same time, as it might have been frustrating, when I look at it now in hindsight I also see the urgency surrounding that need for more immediate results, and I respect where it's coming from.

We didn't stay together for a long time after the conference. I think it was a very good catalyst for people. You know, people went on to sort of specialize. There were people who wanted to work in research and science and put energy there. There were people who wanted to do outreach and education work, and condom/needle exchange street work. There were people that wanted to work with government policies and reforms. There were people who were doing hospice care. You know, it kind of took everybody in disparate directions in terms of their day-to-day participation.

And definitely people who got absorbed into ACT UP and set up a different chapter and sort of adopted that model, which was I think was efficient. It was helpful. But it was a really galvanizing moment in history that I think had a lot of ripple effects over time. I think it really impacted, and I think it impacted the Montreal community a lot. More so than any of us could have been aware of at the time. And in ways that weren't immediately apparent. But, I do think it was one of the first times where gays and lesbians started working together. Previously, those communities had been very separate. Women were not really welcome in gay bars in Montreal, and there were Bilitis and Labyrinth, which were women's bars and you did not set foot in them if you were a guy. There was not a lot of political work being done by both communities together. And definitely members of Réaction SIDA went on to have parties that happened outside of the bar scene that were a lot more inclusive that, I think, really laid the ground work for the queer community now. It's a much more cohesive community. It definitely was the same group that led the parties that became Sex Garage, which was another galvanizing moment in Montreal, for both the community feeling under attack and then coming together to form a response to that. But yeah, it was Chris [Martin] and Nicolas and John, I think, who organized all the Fuzz Box parties and then the Sex Garage parties. And then in that same space, people who went on to occupy the space where the Sex Garage parties were that later became Un Loft where like, the Meow Mixes of the '90s kind of came out of that. Those were the first queer mixed parties in the city, and they were great. It was a great time, but none of it happened in the bar scenes. There were not businesses that were catering to it. It all had to come from outside, from the margins. So yeah, I think it did. You know, that was a year later. Obviously, I can't say there was a causal connection, but I think it did have a big impact.

AS: So did Réaction SIDA formally dissolve or did it just disperse?

PP: I think it dissolved. I mean I know I left a couple of weeks after the conference, and I wound up going down to San Francisco for the summer. There was an anarchist gathering happening down there. So, I was out of town probably for two months, around that. But, it was also great to be in San Francisco and see what the Radical Faeries were doing around, not just education and outreach, but also super creative activism. Like, really fun and inspiring. And it was also really great to start seeing alternatives that weren't just kind of pacifist protest or direct action. Like, I think a lot of it felt like those were the two existing models. Both were problematic in very different ways in terms of their achievability and viability, but then just to see what ACT UP was doing and the Fairies were doing. It was really a different kind of activism and it involved a lot more subversion and creativity. They were also a lot of fun. Yeah, it was super inspiring. It was really great to go from that context into a community that had been a lot more politicized. There was definitely a lot of stuff going on around housing in Berkeley at the same time. But they were a good part of the conference and it was good to make those connections too.

So, I left town. Sally left town. Karl moved... You know, kind of the core of people. Karen was still around. And then, I think, some people fell off and a lot of new people joined. I think Eric was still really active in it. Yeah, eventually it just sort of got absorbed into the ACT UP chapter here. But, there was a big Toronto connection as well. Did you know Kalpesh?

GK: Yes.

AS: Yeah, so he would have probably gone to Toronto somewhere around then, right after the conference.

GK: He did go to Toronto.

PP: He was a good fellow.

AS: Was he involved with Réaction SIDA, Kalpesh?

PP: Mhmm.

GK: I didn't know that.

AS: Do you want to say anything about him? We're trying to remember some of the people that are lost.

PP: I mean, what a lovely man. He was really lovely. He was a good friend. He wasn't involved in the early meetings, but I think more around the conference was when I got to know him. He was tireless. He was just so dedicated and so optimistic, despite being met with so many obstacles. He was positive. He was working in a lab in McGill and being met with a ton of resistance. No one was taking his work seriously; he wasn't getting funding. But, he was tireless and optimistic and just incredibly lovely to be with all the time. He was a real inspiration.

GK: So, when you come back from San Francisco is Réaction SIDA still around or has it passed at that point?

PP: I think there were a few more meetings, but they had kind of disbanded. I mean I do know that we had that town hall that took place after the fact. I'm not super clear on the dates, but I could ask Eric. He would know. But I feel like that was more in the fall. So, we would have been together enough to have sent delegates, but I don't think it lasted many months after the conference. Like I said, I think people sort of found more concrete ways to be involved, like more hands-on.

AS: In ways that spoke to them in particular.

GK: And so then the ACT UP Montreal chapter gets formed, did you have any connections with it?

PP: No. I mean I knew a lot of people in it, and so I knew what was going on. I think I continued to go to demonstrations, but I wasn't a member.

AS: What directions did your organizing move in? Or, what did you take up after you got back?

PP: I wound up the next year becoming really becoming involved in the Oka crisis.

AS: Okay.

PP: It seemed at the time our politics were very, rather than being a cohesive group with a clear vision and ideas about how to work towards it, we were very respondent to what was going on in our community. And something like the Oka crisis just coloured everything. You know, it really seemed to take precedence over anything else. So, we wound up doing a lot of work for the next few months over that in Kanesatake, in Oka, in Kahnawake, and in town. I was still part of the bookstore collective and there was ongoing political prisoner correspondence. I was involved in community radio... And what else? It was 25 years ago! [laughter]

AS: It's amazing that you're able to remember all of these things.

PP: I wish it were a little clearer. It was a while ago.

GK: I was wondering if you wanted to tell a little more about the Oka crisis and how people who might have been involved in Réaction SIDA or AIDS activist-driven queer milieus might have been connected with it?

PP: No.

GK: No?

PP: I mean there might have been three of us that were – no, four of us – that were involved in both groups. We were all very tight friends and shared a political outlook, but I wouldn't say the two groups at large were connected.

AS: It was just that you shared anti-colonialist...

PP: Well, definitely at that time just having been involved with student media, like the *Daily*, which is where I met Eric. We were both working there together – like, prior to Réaction SIDA – and then the radio station. It just... I remember feeling really nervous that we could be on the verge of another Wounded Knee, you know? And everyone just really felt that people need to go and maintain a presence, and let them know that people are watching. And let them know that it will get spoken about. There are people here watching and witnessing. And it felt like it could just go really badly at any moment. It was very tense. It was very difficult. Like, we were basically camped out there for weeks just so that a careless bullet wouldn't start a whole avalanche of disastrous history. Yeah, but I would say that there was no formal overlapping between those two groups. There were just a few of us that wound up involved in both things.

GK: That's wonderful. Were you involved in the stuff after the Sex Garage raids and stuff, which is, of course, happening at the same time as all the Oka stuff's going down, right?

PP: I mean I remember when it was happening. Definitely a lot of friends were there. I wasn't at Sex Garage the night that it happened. I had been at Fuzz Box parties previously to that, but I was

too involved in Oka. I mean I was literally sleeping in a ditch beside the SQ [Sûreté du Québec] for a couple of weeks. I wasn't as engaged in the city at that time.

GK: Did you have any other connections with AIDS-related stuff after that?

PP: Let me think about that. I have to think about the timeline. I mean I was definitely part of some publications that would have dealt with it. BOA and...

GK: What did BOA stand for?

PP: BOA was Bevy Of Anarchist-feminists.

GK: Right.

PP: I was definitely tight with Karen. She went on to have a lot of ongoing work writing about women and AIDS activism and...

AS: Sex work...

PP: And we were involved in... I mean I remember when Susie Bright came to town. It was an exciting moment in feminist discourse, and how it became much more sex positive and inclusive.

AS: Yeah, and a lot of that really comes out of AIDS stuff, that orientation towards sex positive stuff.

PP: And Cindy Patton's book. But, I don't recall being part of an official group. I don't know if we had... Basically, we were just a bunch of friends and this is the kind of stuff we would talk about over coffee and brunch. It was definitely part of our discourse, part of our attention. And we would go, but I don't know that we had a formal group... Maybe something will shake loose later. I'll let you know.

AS: So, we're coming to the end and the two things that we ask – first, we 're trying to remember some of the people that were lost that did work on this that we can't interview. So, we talked a little bit about Kalpesh. Is there anyone else that you want to remember or whose name you want to put in the transcript?

PP: It's funny because when you guys contacted me I actually went through and... I mean most of my files from that time I think you have. I had given them to Vivanne [Namaste].

GK: Yes. So, that's where they came from. Okay. That's good.

PP: Yes. And I saw them. Somebody had put them up online, and I said, "Oh! That's my handwriting in the margins making notes." Those were all part of mine, but I still have... Actually, I asked Vivanne to give me a copy of the membership list, which we did in the first meeting, because I knew I had given to her. She had it. So, I was looking over it and there were definitely people on

that list who we lost. One of the guys who was at that first meeting was Ian Stevens. He was part of a Montreal band called, “Disappointed a Few People.” They were an underground band and he was the singer. He did a lot of spoken word and poetry. And he came out as positive in the meetings and he is no longer with us. And then there other people on the membership list that I lost contact with and I don’t know where they are, and I don’t have any way of getting in touch with them. But, Windi... Clearly, we lost Windi. He was a really magical human. It’s very sad to have lost him. And Kalpesh as well, someone who was really dear to me. And there were also people who weren’t really involved in the activist scene in Montreal, like Colleen McIntyre. She died. She was a musician, and a great woman. Yeah, there were a lot of others, but those were probably people that marked me the most.

GK: Basically, we have two final questions. One is, as we’ve been talking, or as you’ve been thinking about this stuff, has there been anything that you haven’t had the opportunity to say that you want to? So, here’s your chance.

AS: Until your next chance, which is when you review the transcript. [laughter]

PP: It’s been interesting because I haven’t really thought about that time for a long time. And it’s interesting now... Like I said, we were so young and I think we just spent a lot of time really living in the moment and responding to what was going on around us. And it seemed like there was constantly really devastating stuff happening around us all the time that demanded some kind of response. And so we were just scrambling to respond to terrible things. And I don’t think at the time, you know, I was capable of reflecting on that period, or putting it into a larger context. And so it’s been interesting thinking about it that way, and having such a long scope... it’s so far in the past now. But it is inspiring, I think, to think about how that little collection, that little rag-tag team of friends basically, just came together at this moment. And then had, what I think were ripple effects that made lasting changes on people’s lives. And I think that’s true. I think that’s how anything happens. I think that’s what happens. A few people get together and they’re committed and passionate, and you don’t realize it at the time, but it can really change things.

I’d say another phenomenon that I find really disconcerting when I look back is just how much that coloured everything for us. Like, who we slept with, how we slept with people who we loved. How we had to educate ourselves. It was just part of our daily discourse. It was something that you really had to incorporate to live your life. It was part of your survival strategy, and I feel like that whole conversation is completely absent now. Like, people in their twenties aren’t talking about safe sex. It’s not even on their radar. In some ways it feels like it’s old history for them—that it’s not even current; it’s not ongoing. And there are a lot of really politically well-informed active people who go there, who work there. A lot of my employees are queer and political, and it does not even come up. It’s like it’s some other generation, some other far away... And I’m sure much of that is fear based. It’s really hard to be afraid of such an important part of your life. But, it doesn’t exist.

GK: But, it’s also partly that the consciousness that we even partially created in those years of safer sex or safer practices being a collective community responsibility. So, that’s been transformed into: it’s only now the responsibility of the individual HIV-positive person,

right? That feeds into the criminalization stuff. I think they've systematically worked over what we thought we'd achieved and decomposed it. And people don't remember any of those things. They don't remember that that's actually what safer sex and safer practices were about. They weren't an individual looking at a list and deciding, "Well, I'm willing to engage in this, but not that." But it was actually something that had a much more social, collective, political character to it.

PP: And it became part of the process of sex education. It just became part of it, and how you talked to friends, and how you took care of your friends. And how you took care of your friends that weren't political and people who were just on the party spectrum. And it's like, we need to talk! You need to be more careful. I remember it just colouring every aspect of my life and thinking that this was just the new reality. This is how we all have to live. And it's twenty years later...

AS: Yeah, and just that narrative that says, "Oh, everyone's just trying to stay alive until a medical breakthrough would happen that would save everything." And so, right now, a lot of the really regressive, punitive things that are happening around monitoring people's viral load and being able to charge them if they're not taking their meds... And even the move toward PrEP [Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis] is something that, people should be on if they're having sex as a matter of personal responsibility, the individualizing of the medical model as the solution. That the solution to the crisis is going to be medical or scientific. I mean, of course, that's true. People are alive who would not be alive and you see this really sharp shift in '96, but it has rendered the locus of responsibility to, not the community and practices of eroticizing safer sex, but individuals and what they're participating in. Yeah, you wonder what's going to happen.

PP: Yeah, I really hope that aspect of it is not lost to us.

GK: It's not the central aspect of what we're trying to recover, but I think we have been recovering aspects of it.

PP: Thanks for taking the time to document it. It's good to know that a lot of aspects about it won't get erased.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]