

AAHP
AIDS Activist History Project

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Interviewee:	John Kozachenko
Interviewers:	Alexis Shotwell & Gary Kinsman
Collection:	Vancouver, British Columbia
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Persons present: John Kozachenko – JK
Alexis Shotwell – AS
Gary Kinsman – GK

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

AS: We are interviewing John Kozachenko on October 29, 2014.

GK: Okay. John, we start all of the interviews we've been doing with a basic question about how people first heard about AIDS and what they heard.

JK: During my travels I had tried living in San Francisco in 1982 and I'd heard the reference made to Gay Related Immune Deficiency at that time, but not much. It was something that apart from us, you heard about the odd person.

GK: Okay. So then, I think it's a little bit later than that you find out that you have, I think probably they said you had persistent lymphadenopathy syndrome or ARC or something.

JK: What happened was I had worked here in Vancouver – in, New Westminster – at a steam bath from January to July of 1984, but towards the end of that we had a major bus strike and it was difficult for me to get to work and back. So, I decided to go back to Ontario, back to Toronto, connected with Kenny Quayle. We went to Dallas, Texas for the Republican Convention, and there was a contingent of people who were questioning the Republicans on dealing with HIV/AIDS at that time. And so I came back to Toronto, was feeling a little ill, went to Toronto General Hospital epidemiology study and was diagnosed with persistent lymphadenopathy syndrome. And interestingly enough, that was in October of 1984. What had happened was the previous two years, '82-'83, I had been arrested at Litton Systems protesting there, that was always November 11 – Remembrance Day.

What occurred was they sent me my fine of 75 dollars just before the November action was planned for '84; that was a ploy they used to try to get people not to go to the next action. Instead of paying the 75-dollar fine, allegedly having to serve three days for failure to pay a fine plus a day for every 25 dollars. It would have been six days – four with good behavior. My mom went with me to the Orillia OPP [Ontario Provincial Police] station and I turned myself in because of my diagnosis. I spent one night in Barrie City Jail, which was interesting because, they gave me my food on a plastic plate and other prisoners had noticed that and they had presumed that I had an STD – gonorrhoea, syphilis, whatever. But my clothes were taken off and I had to wear the uniform. In the morning when they let me go, they wanted everything shoved into this red sack, the uniform I had worn – the red uniform into a red sack. And I asked them, "You mean everything?" And I was actually shoving the hangers in there too. That's stigma and discrimination.

AS: What was the November eleventh protest? Can you just talk a little bit about what that action... what they were?

JK: There was a Cruise Missile Conversion Project protest at Litton Systems – in Rexdale, Ontario. The first one I went to was '82 November – that was just after the bombing that happened October 14 of 1982... The Squamish Five.

AS: Right. I want to try to get some of that into the record because I think a lot of people don't remember or know that level activism that was happening in the early '80s.

GK: Maybe we should actually pursue that a little bit more and then come back to you being diagnosed and that story. But there's obviously a range of experiences that you bring with you from the Left, from the gay movement, from anti-war activism into AIDS activism. So, maybe you could just tell us a little bit more about the various things you were involved in that would've informed the type of...

JK: I was involved with the Radical Faeries. I'd been to their gatherings in the United States. I knew Harry Hay, the founder of the Mattachine Society in 1948. I went to the Faery Gatherings in '78 through '82, and that's when I had been living in San Francisco, or trying to survive there. So, Radical Faeries, Cruise Missile Conversion Project... of course, we were all involved with the February, '81 bath raids.

GK: Right. So, you were in Toronto then.

JK: Yes.

GK: Okay. And were involved in all of that. And what types of connections had you had with the Left more generally? Like, you went to the Republican convention and were part of the protest there.

JK: I was with the anarchists at the time, rather than the organized Left. I had been a Trotskyist in the early '70s during the Vietnam War.

GK: I remember that.

JK: I also attended the 1975, third National Gay and Lesbian Conference that was held in Ottawa.

GK: Right. You were also connected up with Kenn Quayle, who later on would become part of AIDS ACTION NOW!, and you went to the Republican Convention. So, tell us a little bit more about both the gay-related and anarchist types of protests that you were involved in.

JK: At the Republican?

GK: Yeah.

JK: At the Republican there was a stage set up outside where the Dead Kennedys performed for free, of course. The actions were varied, including because we had just had the Iranian crisis, there were pro-monarchist Iranians, pro-Pahlavi Iranians there. We were of course opposed to them. There were a few gay people who did talk about AIDS, but it wasn't that pronounced at that time. It wasn't organized as a group. It wasn't ACT UP.

GK: Right. Not at that point for sure.

AS: I mean it's a long way to go. So, anarchists from Toronto and other places in Canada went all the way to Dallas?

JK: Yes.

AS: Yeah.

JK: We took a bread truck from Buffalo to Dallas with thirteen people and a dog.

GK: That's great.

JK: I was arrested there too. This is another issue of discrimination and stigma. I was arrested for the anti-war action where we went into businesses – like Neiman Marcus – that had investments in war profiteering. At the end of the protest we were at City Hall fountain, because it's quite hot in Dallas and everyone plays in the fountains to cool off. And this was in August of '84. It was the re-coronation of Ronald Reagan. What happened was the police surrounded us, 97 people arrested and taken away to this prison system they have there. I was put with a couple of our comrades, our friends who we were arrested with, put into this range unit of cells. I had done the wrong thing obviously. The first thing after a protest is I wanted to take a shower, so I'd come out with a towel on, and sat on the bench and that was a no-no in that system. I mouthed off to the guard and so they put me into segregation. The segregation is just a row of cells, so you don't really see who's next to you, except the person next to me was a Latino... The guard would come by and say, "Hey Pedro. Want some tacos?" And then the person beyond that, he used the "n" word in reference to this person. And then he came by my cell and asked me if I was a "fucking faggot," to which I replied, "Leave me alone. I'm two days into a fast." That was my response at that time when I got arrested was to fast because it takes you out of their power system.

GK: Yeah, for sure. Maybe then to come back to... so, you find out that you have PLS.

JK: Yes, in Toronto when I wasn't feeling well. I had come back to Toronto from Vancouver, not because I was ill, just because I was tired of going to work and having to hitchhike. At that point, we had a three-month bus strike. I came back to Toronto. I wasn't feeling well, went to the Hassle Free Clinic who referred me to the epidemiology study at Toronto General Hospital, U of T study. And that's where I was diagnosed – persistent lymphadenopathy syndrome.

GK: Yeah, quite a mouthful. That was one of the early terms that was used, and ARC was another term that was used really early-on. What did they tell you was happening with you having PLS, or what you could do about it?

JK: No. There was nothing they could do. The blood test hadn't become available until November of '85 in Canada.

AS: How did they relate to you? How did they talk about it? Do you remember the tone?

JK: It was a very supportive community of nurses and doctors. I still remember the offices there. And later I met friends that I knew in Toronto who had also been going there.

GK: So, at some point you then decide to come back to Vancouver?

JK: What happened was I was ill, so my mom was helping me out. I was living at the farm. I lived at a farm in Coldwater, Ontario – twelve miles from Orillia. And so I got tired of living on the farm because my lifestyle is a little more exciting than that. Heading to Toronto for the weekend. September of '85 I moved back to Vancouver and then shortly after that I attended a support meeting for HIV people. That was the forerunner of the Vancouver Persons With AIDS Coalition. We originally had met in a basement at Saint Paul's Hospital. That springtime we actually had the first march I believe in Canada, which was in Victoria demanding a Class D antiviral lab as well as full funding for AZT [azidothymidine], as well as later the response to their quarantine law, Bill 34. "Anyone communicating an infectious disease willfully, carelessly or through mental incompetence can be held in quarantine" – isolation or modified isolation; the terms of "isolation" and "modified isolation" would have been decided by the Solicitor General of the Province.

GK: The Province of BC.

JK: Yes. Our first protest we went over to Victoria by ferry. And that's before ACT UP, or even before Vancouver PWA existed. We went over to Victoria by ferry. I remember wearing these pins that said, "Person With AIDS" and a lot of people on the ferry were quite shocked and, were pulling their kids away from us. I think that there is a photo of that protest. There were only about a dozen people involved in that.

GK: Right. There's a photo in the AIDS activist book. I think that's probably what you're referring to.

AS: How was that organized?

JK: It was organized through the forerunner of Vancouver Persons With AIDS Coalition, our support group meeting. That was Kevin Brown, Taavi Nurmela, Warren Jensen...

GK: There's a picture of it. You may even want to tell us who all the people are. It actually says who a number of them are below, but you might want to tell us.

JK: I hope they got it right. I took a friend who was visiting me from outside New York City, David Pfautz. And so I brought him along with me. “Come to a protest.” Brian Texiera, Warren Jensen, Peter Biggs, Ken Mann, Kevin Brown, Taavi Nurmela with the hand up in the middle there. The person behind there I believe was Larry, but that’s about it. Yeah.

GK: So, you all went over there and you had a protest.

JK: First protest. This was just before we had our Expo here, so of course the poster – “Money for Expo, nothing for AIDS.”

AS: And so that group of people, were all of them... you were a political person already. Were all of them already kind of politically inclined and active?

JK: No. The formation of the Persons With AIDS Coalition came out of that group, that support network, support group.

GK: So, it was a support group that was meeting in the basement of Saint Paul’s.

JK: Yes, with Kevin Brown, Warren Jensen, Taavi Nurmela, myself, Larry, Peter Biggs, a few other people. And Ken Mann was quite involved too.

GK: Okay. So, did the idea for going to Victoria come out of that?

JK: It came out of that meeting, as a response to the government talking about quarantining us on an island somewhere. That was the Health Minister’s response. And there was no Class D antiviral lab, so there was no possibility of any testing or any new drugs coming on the market.

GK: And so the central focus of the protest in Victoria though was around the viral lab.

JK: Yes, and full funding for AZT – people were being given twelve pills a day and it caused anemia. I was lucky enough that I was on a certain study that was supposed to be doing five, but I had cut myself back to only three a day because I was aware of what it was doing to people in the community.

GK: For sure.

AS: So, without the viral lab would people have been able to get...?

JK: No. The viral lab was essential in testing.

AS: Yeah. So, there was no resource for people even to understand if they should start AZT and what effect it was having. So, it was really important that there was nothing here. Where was the closest lab where people could have gotten tested?

JK: Probably in the States. The Vancouver Persons With AIDS Coalition did have a program of sending blood to the United States to get tested.

GK: Do you want to tell us about that?

JK: I was a part of the program my job was wrapping vials up with little rubber wrap and putting them in dry ice and then shipping them down. And people were on drugs or alternative therapies, like AL-721.

GK: Right. So, the PWA Coalition was actually doing, in some ways, its own research.

JK: Yes.

GK: That's really important. I do know that in the early period of AIDS ACTION NOW! people actually looked to the PWA Coalition for doing some of this research on the alternative therapies.

JK: Yes, but for probably a different reason. For that reason you had a lab there in Toronto.

GK: Yes, but that's actually later too. That's late '87-'88 when AIDS ACTION NOW! gets formed.

AS: I just want to keep asking just a few more questions about this action in Victoria – that first action. So, there's no viral lab here and there's no funding for AZT at all, which at that point was the only...

JK: Well no, there was extra-billing for it. Basically instead of six dollars a pill, we had to pay one dollar a pill. And depending on what your dosage was it could be up to twelve dollars a day.

AS: ...really significant, and with no way to monitor it. So, what was the experience of going over to Victoria like on the ferry?

JK: Even though my history is from being out and being an activist, it was still a bit scary because I hadn't been totally out as a Person Living With HIV (PLWH).

AS: And did other people have that experience too do you think?

JK: Yes. Well, it was the first time we'd actually came out at a protest.

AS: Yeah.

GK: I think all the people were HIV positive who went, right? I think. Yeah, so that's also really significant. And you're quite right. It was the first, you know, AIDS activist action across the Canadian state. So, it was very, very significant.

AS: And was there any response to that action? Did the media cover it?

JK: The media seemed to be very supportive. Like, I think it was a UTV studio that was a little right wing about it... Of course, the reporter from the *Sun*. We had Doug Collins of the *North Shore News*, which was extremely right wing also. And their response to it was very negative – referring to us as “Diseased rabble.”

GK: Was there any response from the government to the protest? Do you remember?

JK: Not significantly at that time, but the media were interested and they were asking questions of the government at least.

GK: That’s great.

AS: So, that really sparked something. And then after that the Persons Living With AIDS Coalition started here?

JK: Yes.

AS: Can you talk about how that went?

JK: We just decided to organize. And our first office was in Warren Jenson’s apartment, and then we later moved to where everybody is now – the Gay and Lesbian Community Centre.

AS: And you started getting the word out?

JK: We decided to form as the Vancouver Persons With AIDS Coalition.

AS: And how did you present that?

JK: At that time there was no funding for it all, the funding came later. Our first fundraiser as the PWA Coalition was “Starry Night,” which was the arts community at Granville Island. That’s even before we had our first Walk for AIDS.

GK: So, what types of things would the PWA Coalition have done?

JK: We were sending blood to the United States for testing. We were supporting alternative therapies through our CHF fund – Community Health Fund.

GK: The fundraising would actually be for funds for people to get the alternative therapies.

JK: Yes.

GK: Do you want to tell us just a bit about some of the central people? People usually talk about Warren Jenson, Kevin and...

JK: Kevin? Yeah. Of course, everyone has their differences. I was thinking about how I would describe them in my context. Okay, we have Taavi Nurmela who was into spirituality. Kevin Brown who – I don't know his history, but he seems to have probably come out of the Howe Street, Bay Street scenario... And then, Warren Jensen.

AS: So, you had good representation from every constituency. [laughter] Was Taavi a Radical Faerie kind of spiritual or...?

JK: No. He was more of a Buddhist.

AS: And did all of those places that people came from affect what they wanted to do with the PWA?

JK: Yes.

AS: How would it manifest?

JK: How they wanted to organize. We organized as a Coalition, and then setting up a board of course. Well, that was essential to form as a society in order to get funding.

GK: So, there is a shift from the Coalition to the People With AIDS Society?

JK: Yes, there was.

GK: And was that about incorporation and getting funding?

JK: That was about incorporation and getting funding. I remember Warren Jensen... I believe there's a photo here... of Kevin Brown and I think it was Warren, they went to meet with Jake Epp in Ottawa about funding and treatment issues, as well as human rights issues.

GK: So, the PWA Coalition is obviously a major group that you were involved in. It becomes the PWA Society when it starts to incorporate.

JK: Yes.

AS: And then did it get funding from the government?

JK: Yes.

AS: That would've been really important for doing all of these... Was it easy to get funding? Was there someone in particular who wrote the applications?

JK: Yes. I forgot the gentleman's name but I believe we had met him through the arts community. He had probably gotten us funding from the arts community and our Member of Parliament here was Pat Carney. Warren and Kevin had met with her as well as Jake Epp.

GK: So, eventually then there's some government funding. Was there a shift in the group, when it shifted from being a Coalition to a Society? Was it organized differently? Did it have a different feel to it or was it just sort of the same?

JK: Well, it was the same people involved.

GK: So, it just continued.

JK: With the funding we could actually have an office.

GK: And where was the first office?

JK: The first office was a tiny little room at the Community Centre, and then we got the front room. And then we expanded to two rooms. So, we became like a drop-in centre.

GK: That's wonderful.

JK: I remember many times the media coming there. Our first office manager was Sharon Holzberg.

AS: And would people who came to the drop-in centre or the space...

JK: That was before Jackie Haywood.

AS: Were there lots of different sorts of people coming? Was it mostly gay men?

JK: It was primarily gay men at that time.

AS: Yeah. And was it open to other people living positive, or was it...?

JK: It was open to anyone with HIV. It wasn't defined by your gender or your orientation.

GK: Is there anything more that you wanted to say about the PWA Coalition at this point in time, because we're going to move on.

JK: Well, now we're getting into ACT UP. We met in David Lewis' backyard in Kitsilano, for the first meeting of ACT UP. That would've been in '89.

AS: And how did it come to be?

JK: It was advertised as a public meeting as part of how to respond to the provincial government and about two hundred people showed up in his backyard and that formed the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. The first event that we had was at Robson Square and it was a public display of art – three bodies (mummies) being wrapped in linen and being hung upside down. That was a public event; it wasn't a protest actually. The next protest was July 24 of the Social Credit fundraiser of *Les Misérables* at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre. And there were lots of elements from other members in the community – not just HIV. It wasn't just an ACT UP protest. There were First Nations people, there were anarchists, there were some Left people, and there was a little ruckus. I did a die-in right in front of the door and while Vander Zalm walked over me, I grabbed his legs with my legs and Lillian tripped over me. Five of us were arrested, included Janis Kaleta, and Ivan Coyote.

GK: Were you charged with anything?

JK: Yes, I was. We were just charged with Criminal Trespass, but I believe the charges were dropped and we were released at that time. That was 1990.

GK: I think it is 1990, yes.

JK: In January of '91, UTV studios had the State of the Province address by the Premier, Vander Zalm – ACT UP had a march there. And I was charged with damaging the hood of the limousine belonging to the Province of British Columbia, and I did go to court and I was acquitted of that charge. But, when I was arrested and I was kept overnight in uncomfortable conditions.

GK: So, we started to talk about ACT UP, we'll go back into the actions and the arrest, but you were talking about that first meeting and you mentioned it was in the backyard of David Lewis. Can you tell us a little bit about David Lewis?

JK: I didn't really know him that well. What happened was David Lewis at our first event at Robson Square announced that he was going to kill himself. And then when we had the Vander Zalm, Queen Elizabeth Les Misérables protest, that was the day he actually did kill himself.

GK: Was there a context or a meaning for that?

JK: His difficulty dealing with the medications and life expectancy, seeing his friends pass.

GK: Yeah. Well, that's understandable.

JK: Seeing his friends being ill.

AS: Yeah. But he hosted the first ACT UP meeting. Had he been involved with the PWA Coalition?

JK: No.

AS: He was just here in Vancouver.

JK: Yes he was here. I don't know if there's any organization he belonged to other than... we haven't talked about CRHL—the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation.

GK: Yeah, we'll go into that before we get back into ACT UP.

AS: Well, so he had been involved with that?

JK: Yes. And that was a precursor to ACT UP.

GK: Maybe we should start there and then move back.

AS: Okay, so we talked about the demonstration in Victoria – the pre-PWA, pre-ACT UP demonstration. And then, the action where you were lying on the ground tripping the Vander Zalm.

JK: That was the Vander Zalm at the Queen E[lizabeth] Theatre.

AS: Had the quarantine legislation already come out yet?

JK: Yes. At one point I did go to Victoria alone. We had someone donate helicopter tickets for me and whoever I wanted to take with me, so I did have a support person, I was there when they passed the quarantine bill – I was there in the gallery – I ripped up the quarantine bill and said, “Quarantine won't work. Only education will.” And I was dragged out of there and they asked me to leave at once. And yes, I was willing to leave. And quarantine was passed.

GK: It was passed.

AS: It was passed, yeah.

GK: I think in '89 or '90.

AS: So, the *Les Mis* protest was after the quarantine stuff?

JK: Yes.

GK: So, the *Les Mis* protest is an ACT UP one, right?

JK: Yes.

GK: Okay. There's something at Fantasy Gardens.

JK: Yes, Fantasy Gardens was 1989. That was the... Persons With AIDS Coalition, our first protest being in Victoria, and I believe our second one was at Fantasy Gardens, September 1989. And

that's where Bill Vander Zalm had an amusement park. I remember Ken Mann speaking. He's passed since. And there were photos of that. Have you checked the archives here?

GK: We haven't been able to get access to them, but we will. So, the Fantasy Gardens protest then is before ACT UP has largely comes out of the PWA Coalition.

JK: As a photographer, a lot of the photos are mine. I still have all my negatives too.

GK: So, would it make more sense then to go back to quarantine and CRHL, and then back up to ACT UP?

JK: Let's do the Coalition, PWA Coalition. Our second protest, which was Fantasy Gardens, September of '89, there were a lot of activists in the community. There was a group called FAGS – Front for Active Gay Socialism – and CRHL – Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation. From my understanding of it, it was a Coalition of a lot of other groups that were involved, like Tom Patterson was involved in FAGS, and Dan Guinan. So, they had two or three protests – marches up Davie Street, and one down to Davie Street whatever. But they seemed to have broken apart because different organizations went back to their specific interests.

GK: Okay. That was after the quarantine legislation was passed then?

JK: Yes.

GK: Okay. Were you involved in CRHL?

JK: Yes, I went to marches of CRHL.

GK: But you weren't sort of involved in its organizing.

JK: No.

GK: Okay. So, anything more you wanted....

JK: You should talk to Janis Kaleta and Ivan Coyote.

GK: We will definitely talk to Janis for sure. Anything more about CRHL you wanted to say? So, the legislation gets passed, but my understanding is...

JK: It was a public response to that from community organizations, including... not even just organizations, a lot of individuals who came out – mostly the gay community. It was on Davie Street.

GK: Do you remember there being differences of opinion on what to do around Bill 34 between different groups? Can you tell us anything about that?

JK: Well, my position was that I ripped up that Bill and made a statement, and it did get on the news. The response was to work through the media, use the media for our own benefit and to educate the public at large about what quarantine would really mean.

AS: But were other people... Was there anyone that was like, "Well, we need to just make this a better bill. Quarantine might be okay if it's really extreme." I mean were people saying...?

JK: Yes. They said that in some circumstances it might be understandable that people are mentally incapacitated that it might be fine to quarantine them. I don't believe it's actually been used in this province.

AS: What was the feeling? I mean the Coalition comes together, has events, people come out. Like, it's a pretty substantial...

JK: ...and show support for our community and our response to what was going on.

AS: Do you remember how it felt when the Bill passed? Because that's a loss, a defeat.

JK: I felt real dread. It was just like, a battle lost; and having to respond to it now that it is legislation, but then also understanding that we would have to fight it case by case.

AS: Right, which is a lot of work. It's tiring. So, then were there people who were like, "Well, we're going to..."

JK: We did have members of the legal community also. Maybe you should talk to Barbara Findlay. I believe she had been involved.

GK: She was involved in CRHL?

JK: Yes, from a legal perspective.

GK: Yes.

AS: So, with the success of that bill, then the Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation kind of dissolves?

JK: Yes. It dissolves into their own respective committees. I thought it was very important for them to show support for the HIV community at the time.

GK: Do you remember sex workers or organizations advocating for sex workers being involved in CRHL?

JK: Yes.

GK: Mary Arrington and, I can't remember what that group is called [Alliance for the Safety of Prostitutes].

JK: Jamie Lee Hamilton is another person who could talk about it. She's a transgender sex trade advocate.

GK: I've heard the name before.

JK: Jamie Lee Hamilton.

GK: Okay. That's important to know. These are all good things. So, is there any relationship then between the people involved in CRHL and the formation of ACT UP? Are there some of the same people involved?

JK: Yes.

GK: Okay. So, ACT UP gets going ... there's a meeting in the backyard of David Lewis' in Kitsilano.

JK: Several hundred people.

GK: And ACT UP comes out of that.

JK: Yes. ACT UP as a core group, I could say there are maybe twenty people. But I mean the same people who were involved in other organizations – you know, Janis Kaleta, and Ivan Coyote. They were involved in CRHL also.

GK: Okay.

AS: And what was the energy of that first meeting? What did it feel like?

JK: It felt like we could actually come together and have a response to what was occurring, because we also still needed a Class D antiviral lab, to stop extra billing for AZT, and we needed the promotion of other therapies.

AS: Yeah.

GK: So, how was the ACT UP group organized? How did it come to organize itself? It obviously was very different from the PWA Coalition.

JK: Much more of a collective. People would have to come to an agreement, although they did have a system that you could be overruled of course.

GK: So, if someone had a proposal for an action what would they do?

JK: They would discuss the action and decide whether we should support it or not.

GK: Okay. So, ACT UP would hold regular meetings?

JK: Yes.

GK: Do you remember where they might've been held?

JK: At the Gay and Lesbian Centre.

GK: Okay. So, unless you have some other questions, maybe we should just go through the specific actions that you've already mentioned and we talk about them perhaps in a bit more detail.

JK: Okay. Last I was at our second action at the Queen E Theatre, Les Misérables, where Vander Zalm was tripped; five of us were arrested – Ivan Coyote, Janis Kaleta, myself. Five of us arrested and there were no charges. The next occurrence was at the UTV studios, State of the Province address that Vander Zalm made, and I believe I was the only person arrested because I was on the hood of the limousine.

GK: And how did you end up there?

JK: Smearing ketchup. It was reported in the media, a “red substance and clear invective” on the limousine hood. And interestingly enough the chauffeur for Vander Zalm at this time is the ex-Vancouver police officer called “Whistling Bernie.” Have you ever seen him? There was a documentary about him going down Hastings Street. You have to check this out. I think it's a National Film Board documentary. “Whistling Bernie” became his security.

GK: So again, how did you actually manage to end up on the hood of the car?

JK: It was going slow enough that we were smearing red substances and clear invective. We had just had a pre-meeting. We met at the McDonald's on Main Street and collected some packets of ketchup. So, that was the red substance.

GK: And was there a plan to try to stop the vehicle?

JK: We didn't know what was going to occur, whether he was already there or if they were going to come in the back door. We were so lucky many times. With the Queen E Theatre he walked right in the front door, right through us. And this time the limousine comes along right in front of the UTV studio on West Second. So, here it is! That's him! Meanwhile Lillian, I heard, was screaming in the backseat, “They're after us again!” He was reported saying, after Les Misérables that he thought we were a disgusting bunch – disgusting rabble.

AS: I'm still a little hung up on the fact that the province has a limousine. And he also has his own amusement park?

JK: Yes, he had his own amusement park.

GK: I've seen Fantasy Gardens.

AS: So, what was that about?

JK: Well, he was a tulip farmer. His history is he's from the Netherlands. I guess he's Dutch Reform Church and that element, which is also the Boars in South Africa, and he had a tulip farm. So, he had Fantasy Gardens, which wasn't much of an amusement park; it was mainly just that you could buy their products, from the gift shops, etc. They did have a train there. In '86 we had Expo, and the Dutch Pavilion had a windmill. He bought the windmill for his Fantasy Gardens. Lillian was quite famous for wearing headbands, and you can buy her headbands there.

AS: So, the die-in that happened there was...

JK: Was PWA Society. September '89.

AS: That was basically when we start relating to this situation.

GK: Yeah, and ACT UP I don't think is formed until 1990.

JK: Yes.

GK: So, coming back to ACT UP and, you know, maybe talking a little bit more about these actions. Was ACT UP largely focused on the problems with the Vander Zalm government? What was the project of the group?

JK: Primarily it was. Yes. But, we did attend other marches, like the Peace Walk – of course, Peace march across the bridge. And we were involved in other actions other than just AIDS-related, but it was primarily about HIV and responding to the provincial government.

GK: Okay, so that was the central focus.

JK: Well, that includes even the provincial government – the Class D anti-viral lab, that was also...

GK: Right, and funding for AZT?

JK: Yes.

GK: All of those were intertwined... Do you remember, there's one other action that there were arrests at that I'm not sure you were present at. I think it was the day before World AIDS Day. The Ministry of Health office was occupied by ACT UP in, I think, November 30 of 1990. Do you have any memory of that?

JK: That was the Class D anti-viral lab issue.

GK: I don't really know what the issues were. The article that I read said that one of the issues that was raised was women and HIV issues. And I know Paul Craik was arrested there, but that's about all I can tell you about the event.

JK: Yes, I think it was the one I was away for.

GK: Okay. I mean that's the other action where there were arrests.

JK: The BC Legislature. Paul Craik was in this one. I don't remember this. They got his name wrong.

GK: So, ACT UP obviously did a lot of things in a fairly short period of time.

JK: As I said, I was probably away for that one the reason being that my mom passed away in Ontario in '87. I went to Central America in '88.

GK: You can't be at everything. Maybe just to come back to ACT UP for a little bit more. So, you described a little bit about how the last event you were arrested at that you mentioned was organized. Do you have any memory about how those other events were organized? Like, how was the die-in on Robson Street put together?

JK: There was another protest here where we did attend the Social Credit convention at the Canada Convention Centre. And that's where we... well, as it says, we tossed condoms. Paul Craik and Dan Guinan were arrested for putting paint handprints on the poles. I was arrested for doing a die-in and a chalk out – painting a figure of a dead person on the pavement. My charges were dropped. They were actually charged because they had touched somebody with the red paint.

AS: So, it sounds also like the response from the police was escalating in terms of charging people, right?

JK: Yes.

AS: Yeah. Starting to be a little bit less lenient or something because in the early arrests... like, you're arrested and then you don't get charged.

JK: But then when the limousine was damaged at the UTV studio they did press charges on that. I actually had to go to court and was acquitted of it.

GK: Did you get a lawyer or did you represent yourself?

JK: I think I represented myself.

GK: And do you have any idea why they acquitted you?

JK: Well, because surprisingly enough, the Crown asked me do I have my pants I was wearing? Obviously, you can see that my pants are torn there. I had kept my pants and put them into this plastic bag, so I provided them in Court, and she, the Crown, was quite shocked by that.

GK: The indication then was that the police had ripped your pants or something as part of the process of arrest?

JK: Yes, and after that there was hardly a possibility for me to have dented and scratched the vehicle.

GK: Okay. So, just to come back to ACT UP and arrests, there was that charge at the last action you mentioned at the State of the Province address. Was anyone ever convicted of anything in terms of these actions?

JK: You have to ask Paul Craik and Dan Guinan because their action was different at the Social Credit leadership convention.

GK: Okay. We will do that. So, obviously ACT UP sounds like it's a really dynamic group doing lots of things in a fairly short period of time. Is there anything more that happens after that January 1991 action, the State of the Province action? Is there more stuff that ACT UP is engaged in after that?

JK: Not that comes to mind.

GK: So, what happens to ACT UP then?

JK: It just folded. People had different interests and moved on. My involvement continued to be with the Vancouver Persons With AIDS Society – the British Columbia Persons With AIDS Society.

GK: Right.

AS: I don't know exactly how to ask this question. Sometimes when groups dissolve, there's a formal process or there's a big conflict that happens. Sometimes it comes to feel like, "Well, this isn't necessary anymore." If there's you could say about the energy of the dissolving.

JK: It just folded. I kept the phone number. They gave me the checkbook.

GK: Was there a bank account?

JK: Yes, we had a bank account, CCEC Credit Union. But we only had thirty dollars in it. I did some actions on my own, so I used it for photocopying. We had an agreement from Janis Kaleta that it'd be alright to spend the money.

AS: So, it was sort of like, “Here John. You take the infrastructure. We’re going to do other things.” Okay.

GK: Now, is it around this time that the NDP gets elected. When is that? Do you have any memory of that?

JK: Yes. The leadership convention – that’s when Rita Johnson took the leadership from Vander Zalm.

GK: Okay, for the Social Credit Party.

JK: She ran against Harcourt, and Harcourt beat her. Luckily at this time – from ’88 til ’98 – I was an in-house photographer with *Angles* newspaper. And I remember that night, running between the Hotel Vancouver and the Robson Street Media Centre for Harcourt and Rita J, and her response when she got the results was, “Yeah, I think it stinks!”

AS: Did that change anything, the NDP coming in, in terms of the context you’re in?

JK: Yes, they were much more approachable to organizations. You actually could sit down and have meetings with them and discuss what the issues were.

AS: They would actually have some understanding. It sounds like the Social Credit... it was not even something they would talk about. Were there material things that changed though?

JK: The province was very polarized at that time. It was urban/rural and, though the NDP might have a few seats in the cities most of the province was Social Credit. I had a long history with the party here because it was, W.A.C. Bennett and his son, Bill.

GK: So, in terms of the impact of the type of early activism of the PWA Coalition and what CRHL did, and what ACT UP did, how do you think that changed the situation in the province at least for people living with AIDS and HIV?

JK: I heard a remark made from the PWA Coalition that was like, “Either you can talk to us and deal with us, or there’s this other organization out there. We will do things legally but you might have this activist response.”

GK: Right, but do you think the situation got changed to some extent by that type of activism in Vancouver? Like, did things improve?

JK: Yes. There was a response to our issues, because we were basically used as leverage.

AS: Right, so the organizations that are more reasonable – so-called “reasonable” – could point to the ACT UP and say, “They’re going to put ketchup on your limousine!”

JK: Or they're going to show up. Or we might, if we're having a problem... we're aware of all the research that we're doing. If there's an issue that we want to respond to and you're not going to sit down and talk to us about the issues, we will give this information to our friends.

AS: So, you were involved in both the PWA Society and ACT UP. Were there other people that were also involved in both?

JK: Yes.

AS: Were most people in ACT UP also?

JK: ACT UP wasn't necessarily HIV, if that's what you're saying.

AS: Well, it was not totally about people actually being positive, but more about people coming into it in a coalitional way. You know what I mean? Like, politically to say, "I want to be involved in other places."

JK: Yes.

GK: But there was some overlap in terms of people then between the PWA Coalition and ACT UP, which I think is important. I guess one difference between ACT UP Vancouver and, say, a group like AIDS ACTION NOW!, which had a somewhat different character was this... I mean AIDS ACTION NOW! was centrally based on treatment-based activism.

JK: Ours was based on politically responding to crisis.

GK: Yeah. So, I want to ask you a question about your involvement in AIDS activism in other locations, because you pointed out the picture of you and Kenn Quayle kissing on Parliament Hill. Clearly... and I'm not sure if you were at the AIDS activism at the Montreal AIDS Conference in '89 or not.

JK: Yes, I was at the '89 conference.

GK: Okay, so maybe you could just tell us a little bit about your experience of those things. And you were then also at that AIDS ACTION NOW! event on Parliament Hill where people also took prohibited treatments.

JK: Right. They were doing prohibited drugs. There was a table set up in front of Parliament Hill. I was at the '89 International AIDS Conference in Montreal, where I was involved in protests there. Funnily enough, the opening of the Conference was on the same day as Tiananmen Square. I remember we did a march in solidarity to Chinatown – not far from the Palais des congrès.

GK: Yeah, we all joined in the march that they had, I think, the next day.

JK: And 1990, the last time until recently that the International AIDS Conference was held in the United States – was San Francisco. I attended that one as well.

AS: So, it's a long way to go to Montreal. Were you sent there by folks here? How did you find out about it?

JK: I was aware of it through the PWA Society and that it was going to be occurring. I had just inherited some money, so I could afford it myself, and I was familiar with the Ontario side of it. Going to Montreal, I had friends from Montreal too. Mark Wilson who I met in 1975 at the 3rd National Gay and Lesbian Conference held in Ottawa.

AS: And why did it feel important to go?

JK: To actually be on the international stage as a Canadian and, being able to host the conference in Canada also.

AS: Yeah.

GK: You were involved in the takeover of the opening session then? Do you remember?

JK: Yes.

AS: Can you talk about that?

JK: I still have the People's Republic of China's flag.

GK: ...that you took off the stage.

JK: Yes. All the flags of all the nations were on the stage and it was the same day as Tiananmen Square, and this is my quote: "I have this flag from the People's Republic of China here. In 1989, the Montreal AIDS Conference opened on June 3rd, and it was a surprise that we did make international news, given that Tiananmen Square happened that day. The flags of all the nations were on the podium. I was quite incensed that they would have the People's Republic flag up there after this massacre had occurred, so I stole it – right under the gaze of Mulroney. That conference was disrupted by members of ACT UP. We delayed his speech for an hour and a half. He was quite disturbed by the time he finally did speak. It was a coalition of groups, individual activists, as well as ACT UP New York, Réaction SIDA, and Toronto organizations [AIDS ACTION NOW!].

GK: So, you were the person who Michael Brown interviewed who was connected with ACT UP.

JK: Yes. I think I'm the only ACT UP person that is mentioned. I'm the only ACT UP person in that book.

GK: You are.

JK: You can quote me. My name's not in it, but that doesn't matter.

GK: Well no, it's important to know that you're actually the person who's talked to. Have you read the whole section on ACT UP?

JK: Yes.

GK: What is your sense of his take on it?

JK: Well, you know, he was coming from a public spaces and private spaces context.

GK: Geography.

JK: Geographical, yes.

GK: Right, but the unfortunate thing...

JK: I'm not sure if he was aware of any other AIDS activists in other cities, because his response was that we weren't that effectual.

GK: And there's just one brief mention of AIDS ACTION NOW! in that chapter, but I don't think he really understood what was going on.

JK: Yes.

AS: He also sort of depicts it... So, reading it really briefly, he depicts the activism here as kind of polite and quiescent and that ACT UP didn't stick around because Canadians aren't interested in protest. I mean I'm caricaturing a little bit. But, you know, just listening to what you all did, that's not the impression I get at all. It sounds like it was actually quite vibrant – people really identifying very clearly, these things are not acceptable.

JK: But again, it was reactionary because it was a response to what the government proposals are. Rather than going forward, like AIDS ACTION NOW! with acquiring treatments. But that was the focus of the Vancouver Persons With AIDS Coalition anyways.

GK: Yeah. So, I think the terrain was just really different here than in Toronto.

JK: Yes.

GK: Because the PWA Foundation, which existed in Toronto at that point in time, had a very different character than what grew out of the PWA Coalition here. The unfortunate thing about this chapter is...

JK: Also, ACT [AIDS Coalition of Toronto] in Toronto compared to AIDS Vancouver.

GK: The unfortunate thing about this chapter in this book, *Replacing Citizenship*, is that it's now referred to as the decisive scholarly comment on ACT UP in Canada. So, that's part of what we're hoping to at least address partly here, because I think it's actually overly dismissive. It doesn't have to be not critical, but it's overly dismissive of ACT UP. I wanted to ask you one other question, just to sort of go back to the ACT UP time period. My understanding is, while in many other places there was a group called Queer Nation that was formed, there was a group called Queer Planet that was formed here.

JK: Yes.

GK: Can you tell us anything about that?

JK: That occurred afterwards. Some of the same people involved with ACT UP here later went on to create Queer Planet – Tom Patterson (later Torvald), Paul Craik, and Dan Guinan.

AS: What was it?

JK: I knew Queer Nation in San Francisco. I had been with them. We did Gay Day at Disneyland. So, I took the green tortoise bus with them at one time. And they were more of an artsy crowd that would just end up doing spot rallies. Just being obviously very gay and proud.

GK: Yeah, so the visibility was really important.

JK: Yes.

AS: And so Queer Planet was in that tradition.

JK: Yes.

AS: I always love the Queer Nation slogan – “We are everywhere. We want everything.”

JK: More of a fun thing to do rather than being serious. We're not getting arrested. We're just out here having fun.

AS: Being very fabulous.

JK: Yes. When I was with Queer Nation in the States - we went from San Francisco by bus to LA... Also, Harry Hay was involved. A lot of the same people with the Faeries, were involved with Queer Nation. Anyways, I remember being on the main strip and this cop comes up and says, “Are you the crew that's protesting *Silence of the Lambs*” which had just come out. And our response was, “No. We're just here shopping.” [laughter]

GK: Right. So, is there anything more you wanted to say about the ACT UP period? Because I wanted to actually ask you a little bit about photography and how it was related to your

activism. So, moving in a somewhat different direction. Is there anything more you wanted to say about ACT UP?

JK: I can't think of anything right now.

GK: And I guess the other thing is that after ACT UP is over – you've already said this – but you remained involved with the PWA Society, and now Positive Living.

JK: And I had attended some of the Queer Planet stuff too. But they only had about three rallies.

GK: Right. You maintained a consistent commitment throughout all those years with the PWA Coalition, the PWA Society, and now Positive Living.

JK: Positive Living, yes.

GK: And what's your relationship with Positive Living now?

JK: I volunteer. I pick up pastries four days a week. I do their postering. I do the magazine distribution. I have a scooter, because of my neuropathy – another issue with being on the drugs for all these years. I just celebrated half my life living with HIV. I was diagnosed in '84. I just turned 58. So, half my life I have lived with HIV. I was on AZT. I've been on ddC [zalcitabine], ddi [didanosine], and later they found out that these drugs caused neuropathy. The d-drugs. The government actually gave me a scooter. So, I might as well use it to deliver magazines and pick up pastries.

GK: I think you've been interested in photography for a long time, but your interest in photography also got connected with your activism. So, maybe you could tell us a little bit about that.

JK: Yes. Well, because I joined *Angles* collective, I had already taken courses in photography. I knew how to work a darkroom. I trained other people in darkroom use. We had a black-and-white darkroom at *Angles*. My involvement was from '88 to after I came back from Central America, because Dan Guinan and Paul Craik were also involved in *Angles* at the time. And *Angles* had been very supportive of the ACT UP issues and very supportive of PWA too. They had one cover when a Kentucky Fried manager was fired because he was HIV positive. Another issue that PWA turned up was the firings that occurred. There was a manager of Vancity. Now they're quite progressive, but at that time they had fired one of their office managers at Vancity for having HIV. Also, a Kentucky Fried Chicken person. *Angles* had given them the cover story on that point. *Angles* was very involved in the community. It was set up as a collective. We had to come into total agreement before anything was resolved as far what the issues that we were going to deal with.

AS: It's amazing.

GK: And so you started to take pictures.

JK: David Myers was involved in it. I had that talent to do photography, wet photography in the darkroom, so I started taking pictures. And getting a media pass, so I could attend certain events, and having my media pass grabbed off of me because I was shouting with the crowd instead of just being a reporter. That was at the APEC [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation] protests.

GK: Oh yeah. Okay.

JK: With my media credentials I got inside and they were a little scared. Trudeau was there. And then of course was involved with Yeltsin – Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton, the “Scummit” that was held here. Yes. I was arrested at that one too. I was at this “Scummit” as media, but I was also there as an HIV activist.

AS: Yeah. I mean one of the things that I really find when I show pictures of some of these things and I’m talking to people, you know, who... Like, some of my grad students were born in 1991 – they’re just so young – and when they see pictures they really are amazed. It’s like, this quality of I can say things like “Oh, there was this banner drop in the legislature or there was this die-in.” So, it’s really clear to me that having some of the visual really makes a difference to people being able to... I just wonder if, when you were taking pictures, you had the sense that it was important.

JK: Well yes, it’s important to get the protest out there and showing people what you can do with photography... I’ve never been a great writer. I have written the odd article but I’ve mostly written cut lines that describe the photo. I can understand that the visual is much more important than writing, because people will not necessarily take the time to actually read, instead they have a visual.

AS: Yeah. Like, that image of the people hanging upside down. I mean I know it was another protest, but that part happening, it’s really striking, you know.

GK: Did you find that because you’ve been an activist before you became a photographer, that it actually helped to inform the photography that you did? I don’t know if you thought about that.

JK: Yes. My focus in photography was activism. It wasn’t still-life, it wasn’t portraiture unless it was for *Angles* newspaper, if they needed a photo of a certain person. I’ve done that. But my mind was more activity, activism.

GK: That’s great. So, I think we’re moving towards the last couple of questions, but one of them is one that some people have some difficulty with. Because part of what we’re trying to do, is not just to talk to people who are still alive but also to try to remember some of the people who’ve passed; any memories of people who have passed away. You’ve already shared some of your memories of some of the founders of the PWA Coalition, but I was wondering if there was anyone else who was involved in AIDS activism who’s no longer around who you might want to say some stuff about. Did you know Michael Smith? I mean I know you knew Kenn, who’s off the coast now. We tried to contact him but we couldn’t.

JK: Kenn's in Lasqueti.

GK: I don't know where he is.

JK: He tried to buy property there one time. Kenny Quayle.

GK: Yeah. He's around. He's in Vancouver. I mean he's north of Vancouver. He's in BC.

JK: Kenny was a photographer too. And I remember going to the March on Washington and his boyfriend on the ledge and his hand was right there on the Washington Monument behind it, so it looked like he was holding his penis. And they used to do these postcards, because they all had brightly coloured hair and they were punkers.

GK: Any memories of people who have passed? Like, whether it's in the PWA Coalition or ACT UP, or any of those groups?

JK: Well, I've known a lot of people who have passed away, but I can't really pinpoint them to being necessarily in ACT UP. I mentioned David Lewis. I knew of him but... Tom Patterson, I'd heard.

GK: Right. But he also died in Toronto.

JK: Yeah. And of course, it's hard to say that when people move away whether they're passing or not. It seems to be a lot of friends did when their health got poorer, they decided if they had any family elsewhere that they would go home.

GK: Right. And our last two questions are is there anything that has come up during the interview that you wanted to talk about but you haven't yet had an opportunity to? Like, anything that's been sparked?

JK: No.

GK: And then the last point is just other people we should talk to. You've mentioned a number of them already.

JK: I mentioned quite a few.

GK: But I don't know if there's anyone else perhaps. My understanding is that you're the only person who is still around from that founding group of the PWA Coalition. Is that correct?

JK: I'm number nine, yes, from the founding group.

GK: Okay. So, there's no one else that we can actually talk to who was involved in that early period.

JK: Well, we do have an archivist program here. You should check upstairs with Adam.

GK: Yes.

[looking at John's photo album]

JK: That was a Daniel Collins. The other [Doug] Collins was the guy with the *North Shore News*—a right wing guy. When we had the AIDS Conference here, he came out and he said “AIDS Circus in Town.” That was his headline in the *North Shore News*. There was a group called Affirmative AIDS Action I think some of them are still around. There were only three of them basically; three friends who got together as a group. Their flag was the red ribbon and they were at the conference. A couple of them were quite incensed by the article, “AIDS Circus in Town,” that they did this milk wash of dead bodies and slogans outside the *North Shore News* offices. But we weren't arrested for that.

GK: How many times have you been arrested, John?

JK: I can't count. You can get access to my file somewhere. [laughter] I want to get a pardon. I'm planning to go to Salem, Oregon, August 21st, 2017 for the total eclipse of the sun.

GK: Okay.

JK: And my friend I'm with here, Jake Thomas, he was involved with Theatre Positive. We did a theatre project here too at the Society – Theatre Positive – was part of the Fringe Festival. He's very involved in theatre. He was a director at one time, and while we're in Salem he wants to go to Ashland for the Shakespearean Festival.

GK: So, this has been amazingly helpful to us.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]