

AAHP
AIDS Activist History Project

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Interviewee:	Brenda Barnes
Interviewers:	Alexis Shotwell and Gary Kinsman
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Persons Present: Brenda Barnes [BB]
Alexis Shotwell [AS]
Gary Kinsman [GK]

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

AS: Okay, so I always start by saying that we're in Cantley, Quebec, and we're talking to Brenda Barnes. It's November 29th, 2017, and we're talking about Halifax, Nova Scotia. Thanks so much for talking to us while you're here.

BB: Well, thank you for asking me.

AS: Yes. we kind of did want to have an excuse to go to Whitehorse, but—

GK: [chuckling]

BB: Doesn't everybody? [laughing]

GK: I think we did jump at this opportunity to talk to you today. [Brenda was in the Ottawa area for the apology statement on the purge campaigns against lesbians and gay men from the public service and the military] So we ask a couple of questions at the beginning, that we ask everyone. So, we start off by asking people: When do you remember first hearing about AIDS, and what do you remember hearing?

BB: I first remember hearing about AIDS in, I'd say it was the early mid-eighties. I was going to school in Toronto, at U of T, and I heard about it from gay men friends of mine, that there was something happening. That friends were getting sick, and they didn't know what was going on, and they were afraid. And then people started dying. And they didn't know what was happening, and why it was happening. And it was a pretty scary time. So that's when I first recall hearing about it. At that time, it had not yet been called "the gay plague". All that they knew was that there were people dying. And they hadn't, there was no talk of "Patient Zero" or anything like that.

GK: Do you remember when that expression, "the gay plague", started to be used?

BB: ...For sure, in the '80s.

GK: Oh, for sure.

BB: For sure. I had friends who would, you know, travel to "gay destinations". Right? They'd go to, San Francisco. Or they'd go to the Michigan Womyn's Festival. Or they [laughing], or they'd go to vacation in Massachusetts, right? So they would come back with stories of what was happening in those places. And then, for sure, I think I heard "gay plague" coming out of what was happening in San Francisco. I think that's my recollection of the time. And then, when I was in Halifax, and I moved there in the late '80s, I became involved with the Nova Scotia Persons With AIDS Coalition.

After I got out of the military. And my friend, Robert Allan, and he became a very good friend, was the Executive Director of the Persons With AIDS Coalition. And I became involved as a volunteer, doing safe sex workshops with women, and also helped to establish the Women's Project— that happened through the Nova Scotia Persons With AIDS Coalition, and this is before they merged with AIDS Nova Scotia.

GK: Yes.

BB: And I actually had interviewed for that job. And I'm really glad I didn't get it.

ALL: [laughing]

BB: But helped to establish it, and helped, when I was on the board to establish that project.

GK: That's great. So you were on the board for the Women's Outreach Project.

BB: Yes. For the Women's Outreach Project.

AS: Okay. But let's back up because there's so much stuff in there.

BB: Okay! Right.

AS: So one of the things I'm just curious about, and interested for you to talk about, is sometimes there's this perception that there was a big gap between gay men and lesbians. But one of the things that we've really heard, and that you just said, , "I was, of course, interested in this thing that was affecting my gay brothers", right?

BB: Sure.

AS: Can you talk a little bit about, was there a difference in that social space moving from Toronto to Halifax? What was the space like, in Halifax, when you got there? In the gay and lesbian—

BB: It was very welcoming.

AS: Yes.

BB: Toronto, I wasn't involved at all. I was an outlier. Mind you, I consider myself an outlier, still. [laughing] I found it welcoming to the extent that there were other women who said "Of course, we need to step up". And I felt a comradery with those people. I didn't necessarily feel a comradery with the rest of the lesbian community. I only felt comradery with those who were politically involved, and were speaking out. Didn't matter whether they were men or women. I just felt... at the time, that... it was a natural thing to do. And that I didn't think that anybody else would. You know? Like, some of those women who volunteered, nurses who volunteered in the hospitals. And they didn't even know how it was being contracted.

GK: Right.

BB: Yes. I do remember my family saying, at the time, “What are you doing? You could, you know, become sick”. And I said “No. I can’t. Because I’m not having sex, I’m not sharing bodily fluids or blood with these people. With my friends”. That’s not the nature of our relationship. [laughing]

GK: Right.

BB: But, yes. I do recall that. But also, coming into the community in Halifax was a weird thing, because I was coming out of the military. There were some people in the gay community who didn’t trust that, or didn’t trust that experience, or didn’t trust that I was coming from the “proper perspective” [laughing] on things.

GK: Right.

AS: So you’d moved to Halifax for your job with the military?

BB: Yes. I was a Naval Lieutenant. I was one of the first five women in Canada to get a Bridge Watchkeeping ticket for minor war vessels. And, at the time that I left the military, I was working as the assistant editor of a naval internal publication – The Trident – and I was working at Maritime Command, about fifty feet from the Admiral’s office.

AS: So you were right in the middle—

BB: Yes.

AS: Yes.

BB: Incidentally, the Admiral, at the time Vice Admiral, Charles Thomas, is the father of the new Deputy Minister of National Defense, Jody Thomas, who was there, yesterday, at the proceedings.

AS: Wow. Yes. At the apology.

BB: At the apology. Yes. I mentioned to the minister saying that he had tapped the right person. He said “I know. I picked her”.

GK: [chuckling]

AS: Wow.

BB: [laughing]

GK: Great.

AS: So, and had you come into, that sense of, “I’m interested in working with people, not because of their gender but because of their politics”, had HIV and AIDS always been

political for you, or was it something, like were you coming to it as an activist, or was it something that came out seeing what was happening?

BB: Both.

AS: Yes.

BB: My experience in the military had heavily politicized me.

AS: Do you want to talk about that?

BB: Yes. I had referred a number of people to civilian counsel. To Anne Derrick, actually, in Halifax.

GK: Okay.

BB: I don't know whatever became of a lot of that. But Todd, that incident with him on the Destroyer, happened while I was in Halifax. And I felt muzzled. I couldn't do anything, right?

AS: Can you talk about what that experience was, a little bit?

BB: Well... [chuckling] It was still the era of the Queen's Regulations and Orders that told people they were obliged, they were required, to report. So... I think amongst a number of people, it was an open secret that I was gay. But I never met another woman who was an officer, and I never had an open relationship, so... to a lot of people, it just looked theoretical.

GK: [laughing]

BB: [laughing] I did have relationships with women in the ranks. Which was verboten, because I was "fraternizing" with my, with people who were supposed to be "inferior" to me. And a lot of those women were deeply affected. At the time that I was in Halifax, I was up for promotion, and it had been a five year period, and I was due for reinvestigation by CSIS. And I thought "No, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to put my friends and my family through that process, where they'd be interviewed by, you know, Canadian Security and Intelligence, and they would be in a position where they would have to lie." Not realizing, of course, that I had been under investigation, that a number of my friends had been interviewed. And I didn't find out about that until twenty-seven years later.

AS: Wow!

BB: So I felt very, very muzzled. I felt marginalized, both in the military and also in the gay community. So I felt like I was kind of flying solo. But the last year that I was in the military, I was living at the Base, in the Officers' Mess at HMCS Stadacona, and then walking down the hill into the Naval Dockyard, to Maritime Command. But on the weekends, you know, then my best gay boyfriend would come pick me up at the wardroom, Friday afternoon, right after work. And I wouldn't come back until Monday morning. Because I was hanging out with my gay friends, and I

was going to the bar. Actually, my first girlfriend in Halifax, was the daughter of the Commander of the Submarine Squadron.

GK: [chuckling]

BB: And I used to sneak her into my room at the wardroom, which was really delicious. Until we ran into the CO, one of the subs, one night in the bar, and I said, “Okay, so you’re going home. Now.” And when her father asked about me, and whether I was gay, she said “Well, Dad, that’s not the first thing you ask, y’know”. Meanwhile, we’re fucking one another’s brains out. [laughing] Right? And he looked at her and said “Well... Just, y’know, tell her to be careful”. In other words, “I’m not going to be the one to say anything”. So that was, you know, it was the official policy, but some people just turned a blind eye.

GK: Right.

BB: Yes. So that was, that was what I came out of, into political activism in the community in Halifax.

GK: So I was wondering if you might want to talk just a little bit more, I mean, I understand what the experience was, that you had in the military.

BB: Yes.

GK: But how it politicized you, and how it made you want to be an activist. It might be really interesting to hear a bit more of that.

BB: Well, it politicized me because I wanted to be able to do something. I felt that I was in a position to be articulate. I had the ear of people who were in a position to make decisions. And I felt unable to exercise my voice. So, from the time I got out of the military I haven’t shut up since. Really. [laughing] And that’s not being able to do anything, or say anything about the circumstances of my life, or the circumstances of my friends’ lives, and what was happening, and how what was happening was affecting me. And it was affecting my relationships with girlfriends, or not having girlfriends? Or, you know, with my family? You know, I never told them about any of this, because I didn’t believe that they would take my part. And still don’t. So I just felt shackled. And I was just really, really eager to talk about my experience and the experience that was happening with people who were in the military, because people didn’t know. They did not know. It was a closed culture, in the Navy. And it was a closed culture in the military. And I was a Reserve officer, so there was a different culture in the Reserves, than there was in the regular force, as well. So I felt isolated in a number of ways and I was eager to reach out and make connections with other people who had had similar experiences and wanted to do something about it.

GK: Right.

BB: I think that’s the simplest way [laughing] that I could talk about it. I just felt outraged that these things were happening to people?

AS: Yes.

BB: And I think I felt the same level of outrage about what was happening to gay men. Like, to me, it was the exact same thing. It was the exact. Same. Thing. And it affected me the exact same way. You know, people were being told that they weren't worth their skin. And I thought that's, this is completely and totally unacceptable.

GK: So, I think, coming back to sort of reconnect with the story, you somehow get connected with the PWA Coalition and with Robert Allan. How does that happen?

BB: Do you know, I think... My first job, was at CKDU FM, at Dal. I joined the group that was producing the queer show, which was called "The Word is Out". That's where I met Dan Hart.

GK: Okay.

BB: So Dan recruited me and handed over the show to me, and then to other friends, and that was the first part of my politicization. Then I met other people through the station; that's how I met Robert. And Robert eventually became my housemate in Halifax. So that's how. That was my route.

BB: I went from being a naval disinformation officer—

GK: [laughing]

BB: —to being, eventually, the news and current affairs director at CKDU.

GK: Right.

AS: I also had a show, for a few years, at CKDU.

BB: Shut up! When??

AS: Yes! I took over, I took over "Spinsters on Air" when I came back from university in 1996 [but could sound like 1986].

BB: That was before, so I was at, I started at CKDU... '89?

AS: Oh, no. Ninty-six for me.

BB: Oh, okay. So before. Okay. You said eighty-six. I'm like... "Oh my god..."

AS: [laughing] Great moisturizer. No.

BOTH: [laughing]

BB: Yes. So that's how I met— And then James Shedden, who became a really good pal of mine, as well. And Robin Metcalfe. So it was all through CKDU. And then, and then I just stepped into other roles. So through Robert, with the PWA Coalition, and then Dan, to ACT UP.

GK: Maybe we should talk about the PWA Coalition first?

BB: Sure!

GK: Did you know some of the sort of founding HIV positive people?

BB: Yes, well I had worked on a film— “living with...” was it “Life After Diagnosis”?

GK: Yes

BB: Right. So I worked as a locations coordinator. Carol Millette was the producer with a company called Aquarian films. The director was Glenn Walton. I worked as a locations coordinator and props services on that film and also had done a lot of the leg work, working with Carol. So I knew a lot of those guys that we interviewed. And women that were interviewed. So I knew that whole community, too, through working on that film.

GK: Right.

BB: I had forgotten about that. I actually asked AIDS Nova Scotia if they still had copies. Because I'd like to have one. [chuckling]

GK: Yes. Well, we have to still locate a copy of that. So that's, if you're going to be in Halifax, that's another task that you could take on, I guess.

BB: That's another task. I could also find the old papers from, like the, what was the queer rag called there?

AS: The Gaezette?

GK: The one Patrick worked at.

BB: The Gaezette!

GK: Yes, it was originally the Gaezette.

BB: The Gaezette.

GK: Now it's Wayves,

BB: Okay. Yes, it was the Gaezette, when I was there.

GK: So you were involved, in general, with the PWA Coalition doing safe sex education?

BB: Yes. Well, kind of I was involved in a specific way, because I had talked with Robert about a women's project. And so, yes. I worked on that. I had done some same sex stuff. And I had actually gone to a conference in Toronto? On behalf of the PWA Coalition ... When was that? That must have been in the early '90s. I can't remember. But there was an AIDS-related conference in Toronto. And I had gone to that as well. So, yes, it was mostly through Robert, and knowing Robert and Dan, they got me involved. I thought, "Okay, here we go!" This is the life I said that I wanted. I wanted to be a loudmouth political activist, I wanted to change things. And I gravitated towards people with whom I could make that change happen.

AS: Yes.

BB: Or, I hoped that I could make that change happen.

GK: Do you have a sense of why they "went for" the women's outreach project? Why these gay men would have wanted to have a women's outreach project.

BB: Ha! That's a really good question. I don't think I've ever considered it before. But I think it had to do with coalition-building. I think it was about bringing people to them, to help... with bureaucrats, with politicians, and definitely we did that, too. I remember meeting with the Conservative minister of the day at, in the Nova Scotia Legislature, with a number of people who were involved with PWA Coalition, with the Women's Project, and with Jane Allen, who was the first coordinator. I think that was part of it. I'm just speculating, because I never had that conversation with anybody, I don't recall it. So these are my thoughts in retrospect.

AS: Yes.

BB: I think that, yes, coalition-building was part of it. It was about gathering people to the PWA Coalition who could help to make their case. I do recall a very politicized news conference at the PWA Coalition, one time, where a journalist asked Robert, in a very condescending tone, like, "So... How much money do you get from the Federal Government... ballpark?" And Robert said: "Ballpark? Zero. That's how much money we get from Federal Government". So... I think... there was some tension about whether or not the organization would continue to survive, if it was only gay men and only gay men who were directly affected by AIDS, because... everybody was going to die. That's what they thought. Everybody was going to die, and so who would be there to help carry the torch? Who would be there to make the case? Who would be there to articulate? And I think it was necessary. There was also some tension with the other organization that was very much focused on public education – also very necessary – but that organization, at the time, seemed to have a little bit of an anti-gay bias. An anti-PWA bias. So there was some tension there, I think. So a lot of it had to do with coalition-building. I think, also, too, there was a lack of knowledge about how the virus affected women. It was all very much studied in men.

GK: Right.

BB: So there was some anxiety in women about... how transmission happened, how that could be prevented, and if we were talking about prevention, we weren't talking about it just for gay men, we were talking about it for everybody. So my understanding is that, after I left Halifax, there was a merging of those organizations because they saw that they were actually moving towards the same aims. Back then, there were divisions.

GK: Yes. For sure. So is there anything more you could, sort of, remember about being connected with the PWA Coalition before we talk about ACT UP? We have, by the way, interviewed Jane Allen, and also Kim Bernard, about the Black Outreach Project.

BB: Oh, great, you talked to Jane. [chuckling]

GK: Oh, yes.

AS: Could you talk about what the Women's Outreach Project did, and how it was organized, and...

BB: Probably Jane, your interview with Jane probably going to give you more, but it was, my recollection was that it started as a half-time position, it was, like, I think a three-year contract with the Nova Scotia government, and it was about providing public education outreach to women around AIDS transmission and prevention.

AS: Yes.

BB: I'm trying to be as concise as possible. [laughing]

AS: You don't need to be concise, though. Because it's an, it's a really interesting history to remember—

BB: It is!

AS: Like, there's this time where it wasn't clear what transmission meant for women. You know, there's a lot of misinformation and just lack of information, right? People didn't study it, people didn't know. And so it's, it's actually, really interesting to think about what it meant to do that kind of work in that moment.

BB: Yes. Well, it was interesting, because before Robert was a housemate, I had this other woman who— We had been Naval officers together, and then she was coming out in the community in Halifax at the same time as me. One time, I had, you know, seen some dental dams around our place, and I'm like "Oh, good for you, man! You're practicing—" and she's, like, "Oh, no, that's not what they're here for. They were not, you know, there isn't a problem with transmission between women," and I'm like "Uh... actually..."

AS: "Actually, I have some information about that..."

BB: “Actually. Here’s some information and if you’re going to be bringing home a different gal every weekend, you might want to know about this, so”. Yes.

AS: Yes, you might want to think about it.

BB: Yes, exactly. So, literally, you know, there was at home, too. [laughing]

AS: Yes, this is, this is a thing that seems like people are educating everyone around them. Constantly.

BB: Exactly. Yes. It was definitely the love that would not shut the fuck up.

ALL: [laughing]

GK: Right.

BB: So. Did I go off on a tangent?

GK: No, no, no! Not at all!

AS: This is great!

BB: Yes?

GK: Tangents are also really good! Sometimes.

BB: Tangents sometimes end up being actually the story, don’t they?

AS: That’s true.

GK: Yes, that’s true! And you learn things you never thought—

BB: Yes!

GK: So we’ve also interviewed Robert and Eric Smith and Robin Metcalfe. We’ve interviewed a lot of people. Yes, we’ll move into ACT UP shortly. But anything more about the PWA Coalition?

BB: I do remember, at the time, really, really wanting to have that job. [laughing] But I’m really glad that Jane got it. I think that she did a really good job. And she also worked in public health already, and so I think she was the right person. I was a little bit too mouthy, and a little bit too opinionated. So I was glad I was there to help make it happen? But I think the right person got the job. And, you know, another person who was involved was the woman who, she and her husband had contracted HIV through blood transfusions.

GK: Janet. Okay. So, I guess we could move on to the, to ACT UP, because—

BB: Alright. I'll try my best to remember what I can. I've been thinking about it all week.

GK: So how does ACT UP emerge? I mean, how do you get connected with it? What does it do?

BB: Well, I think ACT UP emerged in Halifax primarily out of Dan Hart's brain. And Dan... was not involved with the PWA Coalition, officially, that I can remember. I think, well I know, on his part, that there was a frustration. That the efforts of the Coalition, in terms of providing public education, wasn't making the mark, so far as he was concerned. That a lot of people were just saying "Oh, you know, you guys", like... You know, "This is not something that affects me", and I think that, for whatever reason, Dan took some personal affront to that. And Dan was my friend. So, back then, wherever Dan Hart went, Brenda Barnes went. [laughing] Dan and his then-partner, Michael Weir – who's since passed – were really involved. I don't recall James being involved with ACT UP. I just remember Dan, I remember Michael, I remember me. If there were other women involved, I don't recall who they were. I was involved in that one thing that happened at Rumours. And, well, actually there were a couple of things. There were a whole bunch of things happening around Rumours at the time. It was a community center to some people. It was "just a bar" to other people. It depended on who was telling the narrative, right? And then there were all these other things that were happening around the bar, in terms of ownership. So gay men feeling, you know, oppressed, because they couldn't dance with their shirts off, in the bar. And I thought that was kind of stupid. So there was a bunch of us, one night, who decided that, in solidarity with our gay brothers, we were going to dance without our shirts on. And we went into the bathroom and put "Silence = Death" stickers over our nipples – because that was the law, right? You couldn't have nipples out. And so, you know, by putting the "Silence = Death" stickers on our nipples we were conforming to the law in terms of exposure.

GK: [chuckling]

BB: That was a wild night. I remember that night. I don't think I'd ever seen Robin Metcalfe so jazzed as he was that night. I think, at one point, there were some people who had put me above their heads and were spinning me around? And this is before I had the rack reduction, so. At, once upon a time, I was a 56 G and F. So... That was before the reduction. So I was fairly well-endowed, back then. So, yes, it was quite something.

AS: It must have been.

BB: I wish, I wish someone had caught that on camera.

GK: [laughing]

BB: But, you know. So there was that action.

AS: So, can you talk a little bit about how, like, how did you, was there discussion about, like, "Let's go..."

BB: It happened organically.

AS: —“Silence = Death” stickers?

BB: We had “Silence = Death” sticker because of Dan Hart.

AS: So he got them from—

BB: From ACT UP, from somewhere else. There was a box of ACT UP stickers and, at some point, Robin said, “I think this is the night”, and then a whole bunch of—

AS: And what was the conversation about the shirts off stuff? Like, why was that even a thing?

BB: Why was that even a thing? Why was that even a thing? I think that the thing was that there had been some guys who, one night at Rumours, had taken off their shirts.

AS: Okay.

BB: And they had been censured by the owners, by the management.

AS: What were they worried about? Like, what...?

BB: I don’t know. I remember some pathetic story about, like, “If the women can’t take off their shirts, then the guys shouldn’t be able to take off their shirts”.

GK: I think that was the policy of Rumours management.

BB: Yes, it was the policy of the management.

AS: But did it feel like a kind of conservatism on the part of Rumours that was being framed under the guise of gender parity?

BB: Yes, it did. It felt like, you know, and the manager at the time was a woman. I didn’t always agree with her politics. [laughing] But she was long-established and she had cred in the community. I don’t want to completely dismiss, that it was about safety for women, but I thought “Hm... Well, I could see if it was, like, the straight bar downtown. But... this is ours. And we can make it up. And, if it’s cool with people who are here, and who are paying to be here, and are here because they feel safe... Then what’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with that?” But there was some insistence on the part of the management, and I don’t know why? Why that was? But that, it really got their back up, and I think it had to do with control.

GK: It also had to do, probably, with liquor licensing.

BB: Right? They didn’t want to lose the license. Which is, you know, how they were making their money. Right? And to stay afloat and so forth. ...So, yes. There was some stuff around Rumours,

and then there had been another action, and I can't recall... I think it was probably after the dancing with shirts off? I think the dancing with shirts off thing happened in the summer. And then, sometime that fall, later that fall, there had been this direct action that Dan had organized at Rumours. And the purpose of it was to say "Hey, you know, you people who are here, you know, in your Bacchanalia, you know there's this thing that's affecting all of us, and you should get involved, or you should educate yourself". That was the purpose. I think the methodology was a little suspect. [laughing] Because what happened, just in the middle of the dance club, we took to the stage.

It didn't last all that long, and we were ushered off the stage. And during the time when we were on the stage, there was other people distributing literature and so forth through the crowd. All public education literature. It wasn't political. And then, after the fact, there was some story had come out that we had ripped the screen. I'm like "I wasn't even aware that there was a screen?"

GK: [chuckling]

BB: We were standing at the lip of the stage, and the screen was very much back. So that was a story, I think, that got made up to kind of exclude us from the bar, and we were censured, we were banned from being there. I can't even remember how long it was. I wrote a long, impassioned tome to The Gazette, [laughing] as I was wont to do in those days. [laughing] "Gonna go home and write a stern letter!"

ALL: [laughing]

BB: Like all Canadian activists do. Really well-worded. And then, after that, I wasn't involved. I think that, after that happened, there was a campaign of discrediting that was really effective. And ACT UP kind of dissolved. But I also think that ACT UP was really personality-driven? And it, you know, from Dan, and that it had to do with, just not really feeling that the people were hearing the message that our community was under attack. And that, you know, we needed to stop sleep-walking. Wake up. And start using our voices and using our influence in any way that we could. Because a tsunami was coming.

GK: Right.

BB: And people could see that it was coming. Dan could see it coming. I know he was really afraid. We all were. And we thought, you know, "By whatever means". We have to bring as many people along as we can. But I think that what happened with that action is that it ended up alienating people more than it ended up bringing people together. So that's what I recall of ACT UP.

GK: Maybe just coming back to ACT UP again, do you ever remember going to an ACT UP meeting? Like, how did ACT UP make decisions? Or...

BB: I don't remember ever going to a meeting.

GK: Okay.

BB: [laughing] I don't know if there ever were "meetings".

GK: They might not have been typical meetings.

BB: I don't think there was "meetings". I think that there was a bunch of us around the radio station, around CKDU, who said "Are you going to Rumours on Saturday night? I think we're going to do this". "Do you want to be involved?" I think that's how that rolled. I don't think there was any sort of order to the establishment of, I don't even know if he talked to anybody else, with ACT UP anywhere else, about it?

AS: But you would have been, like, in social relation with each other. Like, you would have been friends, being at parties together, being at the station, like there was a—

BB: Yes, it was mostly more around the station. I think that a lot of people who worked at CKDU were outliers, whether they were part of the gay community or not. [laughing] So, yes. I just remember, because we were all around CKDU, that that was the easiest place for us to kind of organize.

AS: Yes.

BB: And also, around that time, too, I had helped to establish another radio program, that James Shedden hosted, that was about AIDS education. And it had a name that was similar to the film that Glen Walton did, that I worked on. "Living After Diagnosis" or something like that. And, ironically, that was, you know, this program was one of the reasons why CKDU was called to license review.

AS: Really?

BB: Yes. Because of the "graphic nature"? And the open nature of what was being described on the radio in order to have prevention, right?

AS: So it was a weekly program?

BB: It was. So, I ran the current affairs department, and I developed a number of new programs, and it was a two-hour current affairs show, and then the last hour of the show was "specialty" spoken word programming. And that was one of the programs. So James did that, hosted that program. And he was working at the PWA Coalition at the time. Yes.

AS: And so, would you have news from all over Canada about HIV and AIDS?

BB: Yes, whatever was in James Shedden's brain was what was happening on the show that week.

AS: Yes.

BB: So it was a lot of contemporary information about prevention, about the development of new medications, about drug trials, there was a lot of that. It was a lot of really technical information about AIDS and AIDS transmission.

AS: And so he was probably getting information from CATIE in Toronto and places—

GK: CATIE wouldn't have existed yet.

BB: No, I think he was getting it through the PWA Coalition or whatever other organizations they were affiliated with, in Nova Scotia, and Canada. But there was a lot of cross border stuff. A lot with the States. I remember Robert bringing... what the hell was her name? Cindy...

GK: Patton?

BB: Patton. To Halifax.

GK: Yes. Robert may not have brought Cindy Patton. It might have been because she was going to Acadia, and I arranged that.

BB: Ah. You did that...

All: [laughing]

GK: But, no. She did talk in Halifax.

BB: She did talk in Halifax.

GK: But that's also because she met her partner in Halifax.

BB: Yes. Mary.

GK: We've interviewed her, too.

BB: You've interviewed Mary and Cindy?

GK: It was in Vancouver. Not Cindy, but Mary.

BB: Ah, yes. Mary. Yes. Well I was at the dinner party at Jane and Mary's, with Robert and Cindy, which was really interesting because Robert was trying to set me up with Cindy. "No..."

GK: [laughing]

BB: Ended up getting together with Mary.

AS: [laughing]

GK: But they met at a party at our place, on Albert Street.

BB: Nice!

GK: In Halifax. I remember, yes, because Cindy was a keynote at a conference on sexuality — maybe Robert did have something to do with that conference.

BB: Hm.

GK: Maybe— I should retract that comment. But there was the sexuality conference at the Mount—

BB: At Mount Saint Vincent.

GK: —that Cindy spoke at. Yes.

BB: Yes. At the Mount. That's right.

GK: And that's, it was that weekend that—

BB: And she had published Sex and Germs. Yes.

GK: Yes. It was after Sex and Germs.

BB: Yes. Wow... I am dredging this.

GK: No, I bring her, later, to Acadia. It's actually a separate time.

BB: Yes, so that's just dredging, really dredging...

GK: [laughing]

BB: [laughing] ...the memory banks.

GK: But, around ACT UP, do you remember any other people who would have been involved in it, beyond the people you've mentioned?

BB: I don't remember.

GK: Like, was Eric Smith involved in it?

BB: I don't recall.

GK: Okay. I mean, he was barred from Rumours for that same action.

BB: For the action? Yes, he could have been involved. I don't remember who-all was on the stage with us.

AS: And also, with that quality of fluid, you know, coming together like...

BB: Yes. It was very fluid. Like, there wasn't, you know, any meetings with rules of order and all that kind of stuff, and how decisions, it was just, like, Dan decided we were going to do something, and we did it. [laughing] Or we decided, or, you know, we could opt in or out, or what have you.

GK: Right.

BB: I think that's how I recall it happening.

GK: So the other question that comes up for me around ACT UP, and we've talked to some of those people about this: What was the relationship between the PWA Coalition and ACT UP?

BB: Jeez, I don't know.

GK: Okay. That's fine.

BB: I don't know. And that's why I don't remember if James was involved, because I don't think he was. Because he was working for the PWA Coalition at the time.

AS: But was there a difference in vibe? In energy? In how it felt?

BB: Yes... It felt like they, you know, the PWA Coalition were the articulate folks with "cred", and then the ACT UP people were just... the fly-by-nighters. How about that? [laughing] But, yes. The frustrated, mouthy, young fly-by-nighters who just didn't feel like things were moving quickly enough for us. We wanted it to [snapping her fingers] change like that. I mean, we were young. I think I was... I was in my early thirties at the time. Pretty idealistic and naïve.

GK: Right. So, after ACT UP, is there, are you continuing, do you continue to be involved in anything related to AIDS or...

BB: I was involved with everything until I left Halifax.

GK: And when do you leave Halifax?

BB: I left Halifax in... 1994? I think I drove out in February. February, March 1994. Yes. Because I arrived in Whitehorse the May long weekend in 1994. I drove. And then, when I arrived in Whitehorse, I think going to Whitehorse, there was something in me that wanted to escape all of that. I did not want to duplicate the circumstances of my life, as they had been in Halifax. So, when I moved to Whitehorse, I deliberately did not get involved with, with the local AIDS -organization [It is now called Blood Ties, Four Directions]. I felt a lot of guilt about that. Actually. I've a friend in Whitehorse and, there was a film that came out in the last number of years with the history of AIDS activism? And he had talked, at the time, in presenting the film, about what was happening

with him in the '80s, when he lived in Alberta, and watching friends die. And he also escaped, and moved to the North. And he felt a tremendous amount of guilt.

I felt like I was abandoning people. But I just couldn't do it anymore. I think I just, I reached a level of exhaustion and also, just, feeling alienated also, within the gay community, that I thought "Hm... I don't want to do this anymore, and I don't want to live like this anymore". I felt, you know, really hugely marginalized, and I thought, "You know what. It is time to start concentrating on me". [laughing, briefly] And, "I'm sorry, but you folks are going to have to deal with your problems by yourself, now". But there was a level of, I think, personal sacrifice? And urgency—that went along with the urgency that people felt, at the time.

But I had things happen to me in Halifax, like, I had my car vandalized, I had a guy who was stalking me, and the police weren't taking it seriously, and then the woman who wrote "Life With Billy" was found dead on the Halifax waterfront with a rifle, and they said she had killed herself, when she had obviously been killed by somebody else. Then there was the whole thing with Pandora Magazine. And then CKDU was taken to Public Hearing on its license renewal, and all of this was happening all at the same time. I was involved with a lot of it. And I thought "I don't want to do it. I don't want to do any of it anymore". But, you know... No matter where you go, there you are... [laughing] So I might have ended up speaking out on a few things—

GK: "Might have". [chuckling]

BB: —after I moved to Whitehorse. But I wasn't, I didn't, I kind of took Groucho Marx's attitude that I was suspect of any group that would accept me as a member. So... [chuckling]

GK: Just to come back to a couple of things you said. You were mentioning someone who made a film. I thought. Who was from Alberta, and moved to Whitehorse.

BB: Showed the film. It was a public screening of a documentary. Yes. And, yes, he had talked about all the friends that he had known in Alberta, in the '80s and '90s, who had passed.

AS: And those years, I mean, like, those years before... before the drug cocktails came out—

BB: Right.

AS: Those were, like, that... listening to people talk about that time sort of, like, '92, '93, '94... They were really hard years. A lot of people had died—

BB: They were! And I didn't talk about the other Dan in my life. Dan Smith. My best, best gay boyfriend who lives in Vancouver. Dan Smith ended up hosting The Word Is Out, and that politicized him. At the time that I was leaving Whitehorse, he and his then-partner, Michael, were moving to Vancouver, and shortly after he moved to Vancouver, he was diagnosed HIV positive. Which was... completely and totally devastating. But [short laugh] luckily, he was, you know, he caught the first round of antiretrovirals. And he's still here. But, in 1995, we thought it was an immediate death sentence. We're so grateful. I talk with him every week. Every Saturday, I talk with him.

So... he's HIV positive, and a diabetic. I asked him, one time, "Dan if you could get rid of one of them, what would it be?" And he said "Oh, the diabetes, definitely diabetes". And that's what's going to kill him. But, yes. He caught the first round of antiretrovirals. Before all that happened, it was a desperate time. There wasn't anything. And there was huge resistance... to there being anything. You know, and even trying to get people together to talk about things, like, you know, internationally, was difficult. People were prevented from traveling. You know all that. So. It just felt, it felt like we were sinking, and yelling, at the same time. You know, it didn't matter how much we said, or we did, it just... it didn't seem to make any difference. And so, yes, there was a desperation and also just a feeling of, you know, it didn't matter anymore. What was going to be said or done? That people were just going to die, and nobody cared. And I thought, "Okay, if that's the way it's going to be, then... peace out. I'm moving to Whitehorse".

AS: And spending that kind of time – I mean, because I've done a lot of media activism, too, on radio stations and, just yesterday was talking to Gary's partner, Patrick, about doing, being the news director, and having a segment about HIV and AIDS, you know – That there is also this particular thing of really trying to change the public conversation, right?

BB: Yes. And that was part of what, you know, we thought we were doing through CKDU as well, was trying to change the public conversation about it. I'd like to think that we did.

AS: So having to go through this licensing hearing, can you just talk about what that, I mean that just must have been really brutal.

BB: Yes, it was brutal. We did an All Day, All Gay program, with several different segments. So there was poetry. There was frank, open discussion. There were weird programs, where I had a persona, I think I was, like, "Hellen Wheels"? And I talk kind of like Patty and Selma from "The Simpsons", before Patty and Selma existed? I totally blew my voice that day, I was just saying outrageous things, like watching guys with their asses hanging out of their chaps and shit like that, and just having a really good time. But there was a couple of things:

Robert and I talking very frankly and openly about transmission. I had also read a poem by a Mohawk poet, Beth Brant. There was a guy who was listening, who wasn't a friend, and who worked for a commercial radio station, and he cited these two things, and wrote to the CRTC and we were taken to public hearing on our license renewal. It was the first radio station in Canada that was given these restrictions about not being able to do or say certain things during certain periods of time. You would have been subject to that.

AS: Yes.

BB: Thank me now. [laughing] Because I was the problem. We went to public hearing on the license renewal and we'd gone through this whole laborious exercise about creating policy and so-forth around all of this. And I said to Jane, "That's all well and good, but I'm telling you: When we get to Fredericton. It's a Gay Thing. It's a gay thing. That's what this is about". And, sure enough, when we got there? It was a gay thing. Do you know Ian?

GK: The name's familiar.

BB: He lives here. Ian was there. He came as a board member of the National Campus Community Radio Association. As an observer. But, yes. We drove to Fredericton in a van, a bunch of us from CKDU. It was brutal. The CRTC lawyers looked at me like I had horns growing out of my head. And we didn't really say anything outrageous. We just said "Look. We believe that we are adhering to our broadcasting license because our license says we are to give preferential access to voices that are marginalized in the mainstream media." They asked us, "Well, why would we give warnings during the broadcast". I said, "Well, don't you think that would have been offensive to the intended audience, for us to be telling them all the time that they're lives are offensive?" They didn't have any answer for that. They said "Well, why is it necessary to be so graphic?" I said "Because people lives are at stake. We're providing public information, a public service". Well, they thought... the way the lawyer looked at me was just like... We knew it was going to go a certain way, let's just say.

AS: I think that this is really important, because I don't, I've had a lot of conversations with people about these restrictions on broadcasting, and I don't—

BB: There was a woman who used to be a programmer at CKDU, who did a graduate thesis on this whole thing.

AS: I have not heard people talk about these restrictions as basically being about a particular kind of HIV-phobia, right? Or like a particular refusal to acknowledge...

BB: It was a refusal to acknowledge. A refusal. They just thought we were doing this to be outrageous. You know.

AS: Right. Not to keep people alive.

BB: Not to keep people alive. They just thought that we were doing, like, we were irresponsible children. That we were using the public airwaves to spew filth. To-which I still take great offense.

AS: Yes.

BB: Fuck you, CRTC.

AS & GK: [laughing]

BB: Fuck you, Canadian Border Services. And, you know, and condescending to us in a way that, it's just like... you know, telling us that we were being "toxic children" and that they were going to save us from ourselves. Because we obviously didn't know what we were doing. And they knew better. Just like Facebook today, blocking the editorial from my friend, Ken Bolton.

Yes! It was, that, that was the environment. And, you know, like, when the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission says "Okay, this guy can take you [Pandora] to a public hearing for not publishing his letter in the feminist newspaper". I mean, that was... That was the environment. It

was a complete and total denial of diversity, and also that there was a purpose for us doing this, and it was about not being invisible. About, you know, saying “Hey, look. This thing is happening. And this is how to protect yourself if nobody else is telling you. We’ve made a commitment that we said we would.” And, yes. It was crazy. It was myself, the station manager, our technical director at the time, Kenny Lewis. Our ad manager, who at the time was Wayne Mason, who’s now the deputy mayor of Halifax.

AS: Hilarious.

BB: I actually, I met Wayne through CKDU. He came in and he wanted to volunteer in the news and current affairs department. He was so cute. He was, like, nineteen I think, at the time. And I said “Wayne Mason. Mason, Mason, Mason...” I said, [snapping fingers] “Your dad wouldn’t happen to be Rear Admiral Lynn Mason, would it?” He said “Uh... yes?” I said, “Right. You’re teching the queer show”. [laughing] And that’s how I made Wayne Mason an activist. [laughing]

AS: That’s a great story about Halifax.

BB: Yes, but the hearing with the CRTC was brutal. It, thankfully, did not put CKDU under. But it definitely made us a poster child [laughing] with the National Campus Community Radio Association. I thought “How could people take offense to this when, like, we’ve done things like...” I went and did a documentary talking to guys who served in Viet Nam who were Mi’kmaq, because of the treaty between the Mi’kmaq and the thirteen colonies, and them talking about drug abuse and so forth in Viet Nam. But, hey, nobody took offense to that! But that’s because it was a gay thing. Totally. It was a gay thing. When we went to Fredericton, and I looked at Javn she said “I should have listened to you”. I said “Well, hindsight 20/20”. But, yes, it did affect what the station was able to broadcast for quite some time. I left shortly after that. So, I think the hearings were that winter, and I left Halifax in February. Something like that.

GK: Alexis, do you have any other questions, or should we move into the last ones we usually have?

AS: Do you want to say anything more about that feeling of, obviously this stuff at CKDU was part of the feeling of marginalization and alienation. Was also the kind of response from Rumours and the part of the community that was, didn’t think that ACT UP was being productive, was that also part of that feeling of not having a place there?

BB: For sure. It was interesting because, to the outside observer, I was a spokesperson.

AS: Yes.

BB: But within the community I can’t tell you the number of times I was told to shut the fuck up. Right? I think you were probably told to shut the fuck up, too, Gary. [laughing]

GK: In other contexts. Not so much in Halifax.

BB: “Not so much in Halifax”... I thought, “Okay, this is a weird place to be in. Where I was expected to say things, and I was being shoved out, and then people were like “Oh, who do you think you are?” I’m like “Okay, well, I’ve had enough of this.” It just meant, it was a combination of that and also I thought... “If I’m ever going to work in media, outside of, like, campus radio, I need to leave Halifax”. Because I had been far too outspoken on a number of controversial issues to be taken seriously as an impartial journalist. So I moved as far away from Halifax as I could [laughing] and still stay in the country.

AS: It’s true.

BB: My story followed me, though. People knew I was coming before I arrived. [laughing] So I got to be ostracized all over again, without even being known, which was interesting.

GK: So, our last sort of questions, which we ask everyone, is first of all, we’re trying to also remember people who are no-longer with us.

BB: Yes...

GK: So if you can remember any of the people who were activists or people living with AIDS and HIV who might have passed while you were involved in Halifax?

BB: Wilson.

GK: Wilson Hodder.

BB: Yes. And his partner. ... Actually, I didn’t know that Wilson had passed. That was the other thing, too, I had discontinuity with the community in Halifax after I left.

AS and GK: Right.

BB: I came to visit. I came back to visit about a year after I had left, and some people that I knew were still around? But a number of the guys that we had interviewed for Glenn Walton’s film had passed.

GK: Right.

BB: And so that’s why I refer you to that film, because I knew a number of those guys, and it’s a sin I don’t recall all of their names. But I remember Wilson in particular, because he had also been in the Service?

GK: Yes.

BB: So I had a certain affinity with him. And when I came back to visit, I think it was the summer of 1995? He had passed. And I didn’t know.

GK: Yes, it was around then.

BB: And we also had dinner with a bunch of people, and I think it was Jane Kansas that had told me, and I just had a complete and total breakdown at this dinner. And she's like, "Jesus Christ, Barnes, get yourself an email" [laughing]. An email address! Like, so I can read the obits from Halifax. I don't know. I do remember Eric, as well. I remember going and interviewing Eric with Glen at his apartment in Halifax. What a lovely man. He'd been a teacher.

AS: Yes.

BB: I had been accepted to teacher's college, and I didn't go. I had been a nationally and internationally ranked speed swimmer, and I wanted to be a coach, and didn't become a coach. I didn't do anything that involved working with children, which is what I'd always wanted to do, because I saw people being fired. For, you know, I think a national volleyball coach? And Eric, he was shuffled out of teaching, working into the department. ...And I don't remember a lot about those interviews. But I do remember Eric talking about how... the hardest day of the year, for him, was when the kids were going back to school... That man was a born teacher. A born teacher. I thought "Wow." So all of those kind of stories. Of course it politicized me! I'm just, the injustice of it. And not only the injustice, but how... we robbed ourselves of all of that potential. Of all of that ability. Of all of that skill. Of all of that passion and love. Was embodied, for me, in the answer to that question. Because it was an annual reminder.

So I do remember Eric, and I do remember Wilson. And I thought that these guys were two of the loveliest men I'd ever met in my life. I remember Eric playing his piano in his apartment. I just thought "Wow..." I remember Wilson talking about the love that he had for his partner. [laughing] And he was a scamp. [laughing] I don't know if you were friends with Wilson.

GK: I knew him a little bit, but not very well.

BB: But I was just acquainted with him, but I remember him talking about his partner, seeing him for the first time, and saying "Ah. I just had to have that ass".

ALL: [laughing]

BB: Robert, of course, was the one I was closest to. But I haven't remained in touch.

GK: He's in the States now.

BB: Is he? Yes, the last time I saw him was in Halifax. I'd gone to a friend's wedding. A friend that I had met working in – CBC – in Whitehorse. He was getting married in Prince Edward Island. So I'd gone to Halifax, I stayed at Jane Wright's place. She force-fed me, every day, at the restaurant. [chuckling] And we had a little gathering, and I saw Robert and Jane, and some other folks from Halifax. And, I think, at that time Robert was working as a bureaucrat? Maybe working in health, or health-promotions, or something like that, in Halifax. Yes. I think... There was a part of me... that didn't want to be the person I had been. When I moved to Whitehorse. What I mean was that... There was an acknowledgement in me that I just couldn't be as reactionary to everything as I had

been. That that was just too precarious of an existence. I needed to find some other balance. But in order to find balance I had to go the other way.

AS: Yes.

BB: And so I guess, in a way, I ended up divorcing myself from that past for a long time. So I've done my best to remember, because for a long time I forced myself not to.

GK: Right.

BB: You know, when Gary contacted me to see if I wanted to talk about this? I thought "I have to think about that for a while". Just like the apology, it brings up things that happened a long time ago that are not a part of my life now, but were definitely really formative and continue to inform the work that I do now. And have always done. Definitely informed the work I did, in terms of doing the anti-bullying, anti-violence work, for the Yukon government. Basically, every time I went into a school, and I asked them, "Okay... Tell me what words you use to put down other people. I'll let you know whether anything's changed in thirty years". [laughing] I said "Oh," lots of the time, I'm like, "Oh, you're so unoriginal. Tell me something I haven't heard". [laughing]

AS: So, just our last last question is really—

BB: "Last-last question"?

GK: We have two last questions.

BB: Two last questions.

GK: Well, one is, I think you probably mentioned names already, but we always ask people if they **think there's people we might not have yet talked to about AIDS activism in Halifax whom you might suggest we talk to.**

BB: Yeah, I think I probably mentioned all the people that I remember. There was another guy named Dan?

GK: Yes, maybe.

BB: A different Dan – not Dan Hart, not Dan Smith – who worked for the PWA Coalition. He did public education outreach with gay men. And there was a circle that met at the Coalition, I do recall. But I can't remember his last name. And there was a fellow who was Robert's partner at the time? I think he was an Anglican... minister, or something? I can't remember.

GK: Yes, I don't know who Robert's partner was, at the time, but...

BB: He was a man who was older than Robert.

GK: Okay.

BB: Michael? I can't remember. Okay.

GK: So, that's really helpful. And the very, very last question is just: Is there anything else you want to say before we turn the recorder off?

BB: I'm sorry if I have bad hair. [laughing]

AS: Your hair is great!

GK: Your hair is wonderful. No, anything that's come up as we've been talking that you haven't had an opportunity to say, this is sort of your chance for that. About anything.

BB: [laughing] It reminds me of a note that I had from a Director – as I recently made my professional theatre acting debut – and she gave me a note in the context of rehearsal for the play, that I've never gotten in that context or in any other context. She said "Brenda, you could take it bigger if you want to".

BB and AS: [laughing] AS: You're like, "Tell me that again!"

BB: [laughing] Exactly. And I just kind of have that as a note in life. "You could take it bigger if you want to". No, just thank you so much for the opportunity and I'm really glad, once again, you're the right people and I wish you all the success with this project. I can hardly wait to see it. Just like I could hardly wait to see *The Canadian War on Queers*. A massively researched, exhaustive tome.

All: [laughing]

GK: I like the "tome" part.

BB: I love "tome".

GK: And it makes a good weapon, too, if you throw it.

BB: It is! It's quite heavy! It's better than an "M" encyclopedia, actually, if you want to whack somebody over the back of the head. [laughing] "Here!" "Read this!" [laughing]

AS: I'm really glad that you decided to talk to us. Thank you.

BB: Yes, I'm really glad I had the chance to. I totally forgot about it, and I'm glad that you brought it back up again, when you knew I was coming down.

GK: Well, I thought it was probably our only possibility, so.

BB: You are correct. [chuckling]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]