GLAMA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

PARTICIPANT: Jonathan D. Barnett
DATE: November 16, 2017
LOCATION: Jonathan D. Barnett's kitchen in North Kansas City, Missouri.
INTERVIEWER: Austin R. Williams

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: Jon D. Barnett was born and grew up north of Colby, Kansas where he graduated high school in 1974. He co-founded the Kansas City chapter of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP/KC) and the Human Rights Ordinance Project (HROP). In 1991, he ran as the first openly-gay person for the city council in Kansas City, Missouri. Barnett also worked as a writer for the Lesbian and Gay News Telegraph.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: Coming out, Metropolitan Community Church, HIV/AIDS, becoming an activist, Kansas City's gay community, gay periodicals, the Good Samaritan Project, AZT, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP/KC), Burroughs Wellcome, Mayor Richard Berkley's AIDS Council, the Human Rights Ordinance Project (HROP), Mark Chaney.

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Jonathan Barnett Interview

AW: Here we are. Today is November 16, 2017. And I am Austin Williams, the interviewer. This is part of the GLAMA Oral History Project. I spell my name A-U-S-T-I-N W-I-L-L-I-A-M-S. I had to think about it. [*laughing*] And I am here with John D. Barnett, but could you please spell your full name for the camera?

JB: Well, J-O-N, middle initial D, Barnett. But on my birth certificate it's Jonathan. J-O-N-A-T-H-A-N. And I am known by both names.

AW: Okay.

JB: I'm bi. [*laughing*]

AW: All right. And so today, we're going to start off by going back as far as possible, I guess, to the very beginning of your existence.

JB: Oh, my.

AW: And if you could kind of walk us through, however you would like to start. The – where you were born, your early years, and maybe some of the coming out process. And we'll kind of slowly make our way to eventually you getting to Kansas City. But just where were you born? Where are you from?

JB: I can't help but think of a John Denver song, "Born Just South of Colby, Kansas." But I was born north of Colby, Kansas. Two and a half miles north, a half mile west on a farm. Wheat farm, mostly, but we also raised some livestock; some cattle, sheep, and pigs. Different times – different animals during different parts of my childhood. But I'm the second youngest of six siblings. Five boys and one girl. And three of us are LGBT, gay or lesbian, and three are straight. It was, you know, a pretty good sized family of six kids, and there was kind of an extended family nearby. I had two uncles that also lived in houses that were within a stone's throw, as they'd say, of us. So I also grew up with cousins and – around me. So we had – they actually called the place Barneyville because there were so many Barnetts in one little cluster there.

So [I] went to school in town in Colby. And I have a lot of memories of growing up on a farm, but also living in a small rural community, rural town. And the kind of social layering between rural and townies – I wouldn't call it urban, particularly, because it was a pretty – 5,000 people, so it was a small town.

But came to realize really early on in my childhood that I was attracted to boys. I don't think at the time it was really a realization so much. It's just that's the way it was. That I found myself wanting the boys to be around me more than the girls. And even at that really young age, at family gatherings or other times, there were – you know, the boys

would definitely play around and do things with each other. “You show me yours, I'll show you mine,” sort of thing.

So one of the earliest awarenesses of thinking I might be homosexual, before I even knew that the word existed, let alone meant, was that some boys went through this and went on to become normal. And I never – you know, I kept waiting for that to happen. And that change didn't happen for me. I continued to just have those feelings. But there's a lot – there's a huge difference from having any acceptance of it. It was totally unacceptable. I tried every way possible to encourage that— that becoming “normal.” And I'm using that word in air quotes now. That I would become heterosexual. I'd become attracted to women like the other boys. And it just never happened.

Until the point when I was in my mid to later teens, I'm guessing 16, 17, 18 years old, and had girlfriends and one of them – this was during my religious period, too – just flat out told me, “You're gay.” [*chuckling*] You know? “This isn't working.” So, you know, I was really startled by that challenge and observation. And it wasn't hateful or hostile, but it was a pretty brusk bit of information and I didn't accept it. You know, “No, I'm not.”

So I'm kind of fast forwarding through a lot of years there, because we'd be here all day if I talked about childhood.

AW: It's okay.

JB: But by the time I was 18 – between 18 and 19, I was starting to realize who I was, what I was. That I was gay. That I was attracted to other men. And still had held some hope that I could figure out a way to change that. That's just why I was following the Jesus – what we called the Jesus movement back then. That, you know, God would change me, God would save me. And I had gotten so confused, and distressed, and distraught over the whole thing that at one point I did seek help with a psychiatrist or psychologist. And I remember telling him – just giving him a warning right up front that “if you try to tell me I'm okay, I'll never see you again.” And he said, “Oh, whoa. Stop. Let's go back. Let's talk about some other things first.” So we spent the hour talking about other things, and I went back a week later and told him, “Well maybe I need to deal with this.” And he said, “I'm so relieved because there's nothing I can do to change you. You know, when you said that, I just – I didn't know what to do.” And I don't remember how many sessions we had. Probably just two or three.

The nut of it was he said, “You need to get out of Colby. [*laughing*] You need to go to the city and find other people like yourself.” I, I – that I found somebody with that much – this would have been – I graduated in '74, so this was probably about then. '74 – '75. That I found somebody back then who was that forward thinking, or at least accepting—didn't try to put me in some kind of reparative therapy or whatever—was really fortunate.

And that's – and right along those same lines or at that same time, I knew my brother Gordon was gay. I mean, I had been in his home. I had seen the books in his library, and the homoerotic material. They were all in the name of art. They were artsy books, you

know. But part of me had to know. And so I reached out to him, and that was the turning point for me was to have an older brother, a sibling, who was able to pull me in and say, “Okay. Let's, you know, let's go with this,” and, and to be my – I called him my guru for a long time. You know, he was a Godsend, is a Godsend and a lifesaver for me. And not much later after that, the realization that my sister was a lesbian.

So I'll move to-

AW: And where – so where were they at the – at that time? Or when did they leave and how old were you?

JB: Well, Gordon had gone to college in Denver, so he left right after high school and was kind of – the only time we saw him was when we'd go to Denver and visit at his place or he would come home for holidays sometimes. And I – you know, there were some memorable times with – and he was, he was always the cool brother. He usually brought a male friend home with him, and always brought something interesting and different into the family. One year it was stuffed grape leaves, which may sound silly now, but realize in the '70s in western Kansas, you know, we didn't – you didn't eat such things. That was—that was exotic. We didn't have a McDonald's for Christ's sake. We'd go to Denver and one of the exciting things to do was to go to a McDonald's. That, that's – I'm trying to give sort of a flavor for what, you know, what my childhood was like.

AW: Yeah.

JB: There was – I was easily impressed and entertained and humored with things that were – if McDonald's is exotic, you know, what does that say about how boring my environment was?

AW: Well also I think it probably speaks to your – I mean, if stuffed grape leaves were exotic…

JB: [*chuckles*]

AW: …if that sort of thing didn't happen in Colby, Kansas, I imagine getting information about being gay-

JB: Oh, my god. Yeah. I'm pretty sure that I tried looking up the words at the library. You know, and honestly I don't have a good recollection now other than it was – I do have, I do have a little bit of a recollection that – and I can't tell you who the sexologist or whatever was, but that homosexuals would meet each other in the bathrooms at bowling alleys and drop notes to each other on little pieces of toilet paper between the bathroom stalls, and that they were the words like perverts and deviants. That was the language of the text that I would find when I was able to find something.

And we didn't have computers to do a Google search. It was you go the card – you know, the Dewey Decimal card system and there was nothing there under H for homosexual. So

I would go find books and look up in the indexes and maybe find something that referenced homosexuality. And it was all extremely negative and medically threatening. That we were deviants and perverts in need of severe intervention and treatment, you know. A danger to others. And it was very scary definitions that I was reading.

AW: But then you were aware that your older brother Gordon was gay.

JB: Right.

AW: And when did you leave Colby and where did you go?

JB: Well, I know I was 19. So we have to do the numbers. So that would have been '75. And he lived in Sedona, Arizona—northern Arizona. And Sedona is sort of one of those unique places – there's several of them in the country that are – I use the term vortexes– unique, small towns that have a special energy, a special draw to artists, and Eureka Springs is one of them. Province Town is one of them. Sedona, Arizona is one of them. Silver City, New Mexico is another that I'm aware of, and I know there's dozens or hundreds of them in other places.

So he lived in Sedona, which was a tourist destination and arts cultural center in northern Arizona. And his partner owned a restaurant there and I went and worked for his partner to make – earn some money while I was coming out, basically. And we would go to Phoenix and the first gay bar I ever went to was in Phoenix. There was a drag show. And the first person I went home with for, for sex was a drag queen, and I was not even sure how it happened or why it happened the way it did, because there was no – there was certainly no attraction for me with that. It was – this person was too much like a woman to really be sexually attracted to her. But anyway, that was, that was – I remember the year, because in Arizona you could go to the bars when you were 19. And I was just barely old enough to go to the bars legally. So that's how I can remember that. That was my coming out scene.

I lived with Gordon less than a year, but maybe close to that. [I] got grounded with other gay people in Sedona and went to Phoenix on weekends by myself sometimes. And at that point, the main meeting place and cultural scene was the gay bars.

AW: Okay.

[Off topic conversation about light coming through the door]
[recording pauses]
[recording resumes]

AW: Okay. Okay. And we are back. So with these early years, and you had gone and lived with Gordon— Maybe you can talk about how – what eventually brought you to Kansas City.

JB: Well, there was an interim piece there which was Color – Denver. I went and lived there with one of Gordon's friends for several months, and that was another key experience to identifying with the gay – there was a community, there was a gay community, and a significant one. And I was kind of ping ponging between Sedona, Denver and Colby for a while. In Colby I got involved with elicit drug use. Crystal, specifically. Mainlining it. I met my first boyfriend in Colby who was – turned out to be a drug addict. And that got serious. That got problematic and I left Colby in a hurry and left it for good because a fear of getting arrested. So I went back to Arizona at that point.

But then jumping forward one or two years, and boy, what year would this have been? I'm thinking probably '77, but I'm kind of guessing. My sister lived in Kansas City, Mary Lee [phonetic 00:14:20]. And Mary Lee had a – had her own business, all women construction remodeling business called House Work. And I've done remodeling even when I was younger with my dad before I left Colby. So I'd had quite a bit of experience doing a variety of remodeling things. So I came to Kansas City specifically to help her out because all of a sudden she was unable to work.

And that's – that was that – why, you're going to send me off here, because that was a – an enorm – there's a word. If you hear me use it, it's from Riane Eisler's book, "The Chalice and the Blade." A bifurcation point. It's one of those points in history where the world could go this direction or that direction, and it goes in this direction. So that was – in my life, there was this bifurcation point in my mind, and it was coming to Kansas City and spending time with my sister who was a suffragist lesbian feminist, and all women, and I was the only male in this business of working with women remodeling houses in Kansas City. Hyde Park specifically is where she lived. And less than a block from the Metropolitan Community Church, MCC, which is the church that predominantly served the gay community. They don't like to be called a gay church, but that's really what it was.

And so having come out of this religious place trying to resolve my conflict with my sexual identity, MCC served a really critical role because it was sort of a comfortable place to merge my identity into a gay identity. Working with my sister and her women friends who were teaching me how to use new words. There were certain words that were just not to be used; bitch, honey, girl. Those aren't manhole covers. Those are access covers. You know, I had this intensive crash course on inclusive language from these wonderful women – I say wonderful because they allowed me into this other way. I was the rarity and the exception. These were women who were rejecting any contact with men. I mean, they really were trying to be separatists from men altogether, which –you know-

AW: So did, like – specifically with your sister's work group—I mean, with you being a gay man, is that better or worse you think as far as their opinion?

JB: Oh, that's the only reason I was allowed. And two, two things. One was I was Mary Lee's brother. And two, I was gay. So there was, there was that – I don't – can't think of a word to describe it, but that was my card, my entry point, because gay men are like women,

right? You know, gay men aren't real men. Gay men aren't attracted to women, so I'm not a threat the way that a straight man might be. You know, they'll – I'm not likely to be someone who would make a sexual advance, let alone something of a violent sexual nature towards a woman. So we're – I don't know. Somehow the word neutered does not work right. I'm, I'm struggling here a bit. You know, I was safe. You know, we were neutral. Let's say neutral instead of neutered. Somewhat.

So anyway, but it was –how does one put a value on what this did to make me who I am? You know, I was still towards the end of my formative years. I was still probably just reaching 21. So anyway, that's what brought me to Kansas City and I worked for my sister for a few months while her broken ankle healed. Then I went and worked for another gay construction company. I hope I think of it when I'm not trying. And I also got – I was hired at Metropolitan Community Church as Administrative Assistant to Reverend Jim Blyer [phonetic 00:18:52].

So I was working – I was getting paid to work in the church and taking phone calls, and that's how I met – well, I met Keith Spare through my sister. Keith and my sister went to school – they lived together in a commune in Manhattan, Kansas at K-State university. So they knew each other before I came to Kansas City, but through the church I met Keith [and] got involved with Gay Talk, which was a gay crisis intervention and referral service. And I want to keep emphasizing this for an audience that today might have trouble not thinking how different the world was when there was no internet. People picked up phones and dialed rotary phones, maybe touch tone at that point. And volunteers were staying up all night at home just taking phone calls from people, "Where's the gay bar?" "How do I tell my parents?" "I'm depressed," and, you know, whatever. There was – it was a combination of crisis intervention, but also community referrals. So it was called Gay Talk. So they – that was the early manifestations of becoming a part of a community and discovering this early work of other people like Keith and the people who created MCC in Kansas City. There was already – there had already been this gay community for a long time in Kansas City, and I took to it like a fish to water.

AW: Well, so am I to get it correct, then, since we're talking about, you know, MCC Church, you were a church boy? You were, you were a well-behaved-

JB: Well, I don't know. Let's see. [chuckling]

AW: And I'm sorry. If someone's watching this –I know, Jon. And I guess I'm being slightly sarcastic just in the sense that – as you came to Kansas City and that was clearly a very important part of the gay community, what were other aspects, whether it be bars or cruising spots, or how did you start finding your way into the Kansas City gay community outside of the Metropolitan Community Church?

JB: Well, so many things seem to have sort of grown out of that epicenter. I think the church was – there were the bars, there were the bath houses. And I was not fond of the baths at that point in my life. When I came out I had this idealistic expectation that I would meet

somebody, fall in love, live happily ever after, and that it wasn't about sexuality. It was about emotional attachment, and love, and all of those things.

And one of the things that bothered me most, and this was – really became clear to me when I was in Denver for a while. When I'd go to the bars there and meet somebody and, and it was – you know, you'd learn. I learned how to be a gay man. That community taught me how to be a gay man at that point in time, which was you'd meet somebody in a bar, and you'd go home with them, and you'd have sex with them while you're looking for love, and it got very confusing. That this was—this confusion about I'm in love with somebody because I find them physically attractive didn't work. I would go home with somebody and trick with them and the next week, see them at the bars and it was like they didn't remember me, they didn't recognize me. It was very superficial and shallow, and that was painful. That was a real difficult time for me, and I wonder how common that is with gay men of my age and era— of reducing ourselves to our sexuality. But this was not at all where I expected this conversation to go.

AW: Well, it's all right.

JB: And I'm speaking as a 61 year old now. You know. I was a 21 year old then. And so back to your point. There were – Kansas City I think is unique in so many ways. But one of them is that in all the times I've lived here, all the years I've lived here, I'm – you know, I'm familiar with Phoenix, Denver, St. Louis, Kansas City. Those are probably the four key cities that I've lived in. Kansas City's the only one I know of that had a weekly gay publication. And not just one, but sometimes as many as three, possibly four. Not monthly, not semi-monthly. Weekly publications. And I think that's one of the most under appreciated, overlooked, amazing miracles about the gay community in Kansas City. It's that we had these tools that were for it. Every week you'd go to a bar and pick up the *Alternate News* or the *Current News* or whatever. And a lot of it was just bar – what they call bar rags—where there's a drag show, where there's this or that. But there was also a classified section. There was the HASL, Heart of America's Softball League. There was the Gay Outdoor Club. There was a bowling team. There were these groups, 10-400 club would have a picnic a few times a year. So there were social places, groups, organizations that were bringing people together other than just the bars or the church.

And outside of that, it was really more of a – what I would call a living room thing. You knew somebody and they knew somebody, and on a weekend there would be a party, and you'd go to somebody's home. And those just sort of had a way of—maybe spinning a web is a way of putting it; a net, a building, a community of interconnected, you know – this person may not be connected to that person directly, but they were – if you followed the threads enough, there was a connection there. It really was a community, if not a family, in so many ways.

AW: With those gay periodicals— We've talked about in the past that you were also able to read a lot of things that were coming out of New York and Boston and other periodicals. However, you would like to talk about when you first heard about what might have been referred to as GRID or eventually was referred to as AIDS.

JB: Gay cancer.

AW: Gay cancer.

JB: It was the gay cancer. It was – boy, that's my first recollection of a name for it. It didn't really have a name. But I've – and I will get to that, but I want to jump back just a bit, because you asked about how I was discovering community and interacting. Or that's how I took the question.

AW: Sure.

JB: There was another institution that was critical, which was – it was – the name changed. I think it was originally New Earth Bookstore on 39th Street, which I think became Phoenix Books. I may have that turned around. Sorry, my memory's not great. But it was on 39th Street and they were a distribution site for *Bay Area Reporter, New York Native, Washington Blade,* these larger coastal news – more newspapers than bar rags. And so these were resources that—I would go every week and gather up every issue I could find of the gay publications from other cities. By that time, the news was weeks old, but I was getting information from other cities that way. And I'm an avid reader, so I'd – every time they'd get a new set of books, then I'd go in and spend my entire allowance on books. So another nucleus of information exchange and community building was through that bookstore. That was not a sexual place or an alcohol – not a bar or bath house or an adult bookstore.

So – but then – so we're – I, I know exactly where I was at the first time I heard about AIDS.

AW: I'm sorry. Can we take a quick break? There's something…

[recording pauses]
[recording resumes]

AW: We are back. Thank you for taking the break, folks. And as we were just talking about, oh, this – the energy and you get a big yawn [*laughing at JB yawning*]

JB: Crank me up again.

AW: Where were you when you heard about gay cancer?

JB: I was at Blue Valley Park, which was my cruise park of choice. There was Penn Valley Park, or the mall which was the best known or the most heavily frequented gay cruise park in the city. But it wasn't the only one. Blue Valley was on the east side of the city. And it was a – oh, we're not talking about cruise parks. I was sitting in my car listening to the radio and the news came on about the CDC report of these cases of pneumocystis and Kaposi in gay men and that there was fear of a new outbreak of disease among

homosexuals. So that was – you know, I remember hearing that and finding it really – I don't know. I was going to say alarming, but I'm not sure that we knew enough yet to be alarmed. But it was – it definitely caught my attention because I still remember it, you know, what? Thirty-some years later? You know, it was, it was – it made a – it hit.

AW: Right. But if that was in the early 80's-

JB: '81 I think.

AW: Well, yeah. June of 1981 is that report. It took a while before – especially numbers in Kansas City started, you know, escalating, and when-

JB: But it was news. It was national news. It was because – and I'm speculating now and hoping I'm not doing another recovered memory, but the media kind of glommed onto this and I think it was because it gave them an opportunity to use the word homosexual, you know. If it bleeds, it leads. If it, you know–news has always been news and they go for the sensational stuff. And so this – these reports – the first one came out, but they were starting to publish these reports with some regularity. And so it was news that was getting out there of this gay plague, gay cancer. Now the number is, you know – it started with what? Six or eight or whatever it was, and now it's, you know, dozens. So it had not yet been identified in Kansas City, but I don't think there were very many – well, I don't know that. I know this gay man and several of my closest friends were very much aware that this was affecting the gay community in San Francisco and New York.

So I think it was very early on that there was this assumption of some sort, but among us, that this is moving. This is traveling. It's – you know, we were already apprehensive about it because people travel. I was going to Fire Island in New York. I was going to Key West to visit my friend, Ty. I spent time in the Castro in San Francisco. You live in Kansas City, but if you're a – what's the word I'm looking for here? Okay. A sexually active gay man with any means at all, you're probably traveling to the coasts. You know, you're probably seeking out those meccas that just like the rural communities around here looked to Kansas City as a mecca, people in the mid-sized cities looked to San Francisco and New York as meccas on their own also. And Key West and Province Town and Fire Island, those are national and international destinations for gay men.

So on one part, we're maybe a little isolated, but not really. I mean, we had airplanes and telephones. [*laughing*] We were mobile and moving about the country. That's how this virus spread so quickly.

AW: And as it got to be obvious that – I mean, the numbers were escalating, and I believe it was late in 1985—I'll have to double check here—but that Good Samaritan Project was founded. Let me ask you this: you clearly at some point in your life later on with ACT UP decide that you're an activist. When did you start seeing the seeds of a budding activist, you know, start sprouting?

JB: Well, in terms of AIDS, I would argue maybe that doing the work at MCC was a form of activism. I mean, I was a professional homosexual. I was getting paid to serve an institution in the gay community. So to me, that would be a sign of early gay activism. But one of the strongest memories I have now is – regarding AIDS – because I didn't know anybody yet that was diagnosed with HIV or AIDS. I don't think HIV had been identified yet. But the Good Samaritan Project was doing training for buddies who were volunteers. And probably, you know, at least in the first year and maybe the first months of their existence, I went to one of the training sessions to be a volunteer and a buddy. And that's where I met David Weeda was at a Good Samaritan Project training.

So Good Samaritan Project - I don't know – I can't say I understand the first days, weeks and months of its existence—who did it and where they came from—but it was a key force in my identity and my awareness of a need. And through the training I met people like David and we became friends. So that's an example of what that crisis led to. It brought us together and – you know, there were a lot of things that kept the gay community apart. I was talking about lesbian separatist feminists. You know, keeping women and men apart. There was – the age sometimes kept people apart. There was identity – differences between effeminate and masculine gay men. So there were different things that sort of kept us apart, but this was something that brought us together, especially between gay men and lesbians. I mean, there was no – women did not bat an eyelash or think twice about this. We were their brothers and they were there, you know, from day one.

So I'm rambling a little bit here. I'm, I'm not sure what the question is anymore. But the – that's one of my earliest memories of something locally involving AIDS in Kansas City. And I never really did do much buddy work, you know, because by that time it was affecting me personally. I mean, friends were starting to test positive. People I knew were testing positive. So-

AW: Let me make an adjustment here and then just ask you what some of that training was like, though—when you went through the training. I mean, to someone that wouldn't understand, I mean—why was it necessary and what impact [did it have] on you?

JB: It was about being a nonprofessional caregiver, information about – that's, that's a good question, because there's a lot I don't remember. Things like feeding, how to be there for somebody, how not to get sucked in so hard that you lost your own self. But there was one thing – and maybe one of the reasons I have more difficulty recalling it, because there was one exercise in that training that completely changed my life, too. And it – I don't think they did it very long. It was too powerful. There was a guided imagery of death. And I don't know who developed this program or this training, or what they were thinking, but some of us are extremely sensitive to these things. And I know – I don't know. It was a – it was like a group hypnosis of experiencing death and going – and crossing over. And I feel like it seems weird to say this to you today, but at the time, I really believed that I had experienced that. Something changed in me after that day. I wasn't afraid of dying. [*gets choked up momentarily*] I have a side of me that actually is spiritual, and tries to connect with things that are not of my body or my mind, and it –

astral traveling, whatever it was, you know, I experienced death and crossed over and remember traveling to that other place. And I don't know what everybody else in the room did, but I went up afterwards and told him that shit was dangerous. [*chuckling*] You know, you're going to – somebody's going to get lost and not come back. I feel like I'm talking the craziest voodoo to you right now. It's not something I share very freely, and I've never shared it publicly before.

AW: Okay.

JB: You know, only with people I'm close to and trust, you know-

AW: I think-

JB: It's almost – it's this close to being a trigger for me.

AW: Okay.

JB: It was profound. It changed my life. And you've – you were just saying, you kind of know me and you see – you know this kind of frivolous, goofy, joking, flirty sort of guy. And there's another piece of me though that's very real and very sincere when I tell you, that was – there's two or three of these events in my life and that was one of them. You know, where I actually feel like I was in another world or another place. And it changed me.

AW: Yeah.

JB: It changed me.

AW: Well, during that time – and I mean, since we are kind of in this place right now as far as, I mean, the emotion that you're having. Earlier you had spoken to a time when you hadn't known anyone that was infected yet. To help people, young people especially, with no sense of the era, how many of your friends—or I mean how, how could you even begin to-

JB: I don't know how to put it in perspective. And it – you know, it wasn't overnight, but it was so fucking fast. It was like a ride at an amusement park. That it was just one, and then two, and then ten, and then 20. Michael and I had a party at our home before AIDS was here, and we might have as many as 200 or 300 guests over a period of four to six hours, you know, from 6:00 to midnight or 1:00, something like that. And when we moved into town—that was out by the sports complex—we moved into town, and had an open house that literally there were – and I'm not trying to brag or anything. I'm trying to give a picture here of a community and a network of literally hundreds of people [who] came to a social event at – we had a big house — in a period of an afternoon and an evening.

And after two, three, four years, I don't– you know, something weird happens with time. I lost my entire world. I lost – it seems like everybody – and I know it wasn't everybody, but it was so many. [*begins crying*] It was – you know, hundreds of male friends, acquaintances and friends— dozens of friends, dozens of my friends – my whole family, my whole gay family was gone. I shut down. I stopped going to funerals. I stopped counting. I stopped caring. I went into self-preservation mode at one point.

And now you have to figure out where this fits in the timeline. It had to have been – it must have been after ACT UP, because then we were fighting. It didn't just happen in a year—or a week, or a month or a year. It happened over a decade. But early on, they just died. Then AZT came along, and I think they died of AZT, to be honest with you. People still died, and I didn't see people living with AZT. It was a disaster of apocryphal proportions as far as I'm concerned. I feel like, like – I wonder how many might have lived if it hadn't been for that drug. I don't know. I really don't know what to make of that anymore, and I'm scared for people to hear my thoughts now, because it was just such an evil drug given at outrageous doses. And people put on little timers they carried around that would beep every few hours because the dosing had to be exactly this and that, and it was– you couldn't – you could not create a better mind control, mind fuck experiment if you tried. You know, how to psychologically terrorize a community.

AW: Yeah. No, that – we've talked about that. And you just said fighting back. And I think to – thank you for sharing all that, too. I'm sorry to have triggered it. I mean, it's important.

JB: No. It, it feels a little good, because sometimes I think I was so successful at numbing myself for so long that I've forgotten to keep in touch with my grief and my loss. You know, I've forgotten a lot of this because I think it's a mechanism all of us have to have for self – for survival and self-preservation. If you don't shut down, it will take you with it, and we can't do that, you know. You can't help somebody if you're constantly in crisis yourself. So-

AW: Right.

JB: But I don't know. I don't know what other gay men's experience was. I'm only sharing my own. I went into lock down. I hardened myself. I turned off a lot of my emotions and feelings and dealt with the loss. It's like men who go to war. How do they do it? You have to turn parts of your humanity off to survive a war. You can't do it if you think about it.

AW: So clearly, huge impacts on you. And, and I can see, just the way that you were talking, you get to a point where you feel like you have to do something. And I mean, you've been volunteering with Good Samaritan Project, but I was specifically referring to the late summer of 1988. We've talked about ACT UP, and when we talk about it in a second, maybe you can describe what that was and how you had heard about it, and why you decided to form a local chapter. But I was specifically referring to the one man protest you've talked about with the sandwich board and – yeah.

JB: Right. Right.

AW: So.

JB: Well, realize I'm – remember, I'm reading the, the *New York Native* and *Bay Area Reporter*, and I'm reading about the AIDS activists in New York and Boston or Baltimore, and to a lesser extent – I don't know why I'm not as informed with the San Francisco and the California side of things. More out of New York. And seeing– that was my source of information. So there's this epidemic disease wiping out gay men. Just like a scythe through a wheat field. Just cutting us down. And there's no response. There's no services. There's no – the drug – the only drug that we have is a known poison. We all know that. You know, we're hoping it's buying us some time, but Jesus, the price that it – the toll it's taking in the process. And that – who was President at the time? Was that Reagan?

AW: That was –the election, actually, is taking place. So Reagan – yeah. It's 1988, so-

JB: And Reagan is coming into Office.

AW: No, no. Reagan – Bush is coming into Office.

JB: Okay. Well, Reagan had been silent for years. And so there's this mass lethargy on the part of the public and this perception that this is just homosexuals being affected and that we're disposable, dispensable. The only people really doing anything was the gay community—the Good Samaritan Project. So I'm reading about the demonstrations in New York and other places and wondering where's the anger here? Where's the outrage in Kansas City? And about that time, there was a news report, I believe in the Kansas City Times, about a man who was fired from his job at Circle K– or not fired. He was denied health insurance coverage because he had AIDS. And they declared at Circle K that he wasn't eligible for benefits because it was a lifestyle choice, ignoring the fact that people who smoked or people who drank also made lifestyle choices that affected their health. And it was clearly – it was just nothing but a way to try to get out of paying medical bills for someone who's gay. And that was the – that was it. That was the trigger to me that we had to do something. I wanted to see an activist organization in Kansas City along the lines of ACT UP in New York.

And before that could happen, I had to know what it was like to do that work. How to protest. So I lived in Midtown. I lived at 34th and Holmes. And I found some plywood in the basement and put some rope on two boards and painted – I wish I could remember what it said. I don't remember the wording on it or anything. And I went to the – I walked the sidewalk in front of Circle K on Gillham, which was right next to a gay bar of all things– I mean, this guy worked next door to a gay bar—gay men were buying their cigarettes and beer at this place. A huge amount of their business was coming from gay men. And so I didn't know what to expect, but it was – I don't really remember –there was no media attention. Nobody really knows that happened. I wanted us to organize, but I felt like I couldn't ask people to do something if I didn't know what the hell I was asking them to do. So I did this. And within days or weeks of that, put an ad in the local *Alternate News*, a gay newspaper, about, "Hey, let's get together and talk about creating

an activist – an organization to protest this." Your research probably will do better than I can on remembering how that was worded, but I said, "Let's get together. Let's talk about this." And that was the first meeting of what became ACT UP Kansas City.

AW: And then – well, you're off and running, because to refresh some of the early things that ACT UP did, they joined you in the Circle K protest, and I know that within like a month – it was a national protest that was occurring. And that this was the local, like, portion of that.

JB: Local chapter.

AW: But I mean the Circle K protest was taking place across the nation. And then you did this locally. And Circle K actually does rescind their policy. But the first major demonstration I believe was on Coming Out Day, October 11th or 12th.

JB: 11.

AW: 11. that's right. 1988, you're outside the FDA and you're –and there's a national protest in New York.

JB: Right.

AW: But you held a local protest against the FDA. And could you talk to maybe why that it was – you know, why the FDA?

JB: Well, ACT UP in Kansas City often participated in a collaborative way with the other chapters, especially New York. If New York was doing something, we would try to support that with a local effort. And because there was an FDA regional office in Kansas City and New York had decided to target the FDA in the Washington D.C. area, the main headquarters, we also decided that we were going to do a local demonstration to make sure that leveraged their efforts. So there were others in ACT UP Kansas City that were more in touch with the folks in New York than I was. But we had –ACT UP was a consensus organization. We only did things if everybody agreed to do it. But we also had a way of organizing that allowed committees and we empowered others to work on behalf of the group. So there were people that just got to know their affiliates and their counterparts in New York and exchanged information on planning and strategizing so that – I don't know who was piggy backing off of whom, because I think we got a lot of attention here in Kansas City with our efforts. And then we did things that were not – you know, strictly local as well.

I'm… [*JB smiles and shakes head*]

AW: So – no, you're fine. But if –since it was the FDA, at that time, what was it that the national chapter of ACT UP, that the local chapter – I mean, there was always the chant of "drugs into bodies now." And you talked about AZT. So at that time, because you clearly

look back at AZT as this poisonous drug, and I think you probably felt it about – at that time, what is it regarding drugs that ACT UP wanted the FDA to do?

JB: The frustration was that the only drug that had been approved was AZT and it was not a good drug. And I don't think there – I mean, I realize I'm looking in hindsight now, but I think even then all of us either publicly – I don't know if – how well it was expressed, but we just – I would never have taken the drug, and I don't think that was an unusual attitude to have. Now, if you were sick and dying, your point of view might be very different. But yes. The mantra was "drugs into bodies now," but the drug approval process was really slow and burdensome, and people were dying. So the objection from us was this drug approval process makes a lot of sense under normal circumstances, but we're in a state of emergency and crisis, and we have people willing to take drugs that have not been proven safe and effective because we're desperate. We're going to be dead in three months, six months. We have nothing to lose. Let us – you know, because there were a lot of possible drugs and treatments out there. We were hearing about them on the grapevine. Lipids, AL-721, you know, drugs from Mexico and Europe that were not approved and there was no access to them. The only drug with access was AZT, which whether or not somebody thought that was a bad drug or not, it didn't really matter, because there were no other choices.

So the FDA, in our opinion, was being more of an obstacle than an ally in this, and they weren't paying attention. They weren't taking steps to get drugs approved more quickly, and that's what these protests were about.

AW: And while we're on the topic of the drugs, just if – I don't know if the name Burroughs Wellcome strikes any memory as far as just-

JB: Oh, yeah.

AW: Yeah.

JB: Oh, yeah. I mean, that – I think that's –that helps maybe resonate with what my feelings are about AZT; that this company that had a monopoly on the only AIDS drug approved by the FDA was Burroughs Wellcome. Burroughs Wellcome's a huge company with a lot of profits, and they were benefiting from this. And they were, we thought – we felt that there was some sort of, you know, unholy alliance that was keeping these other products from being tested. They weren't even being trialed. They weren't even being checked or tested. It was sort of like, "This is what we've got. Take it or leave it." And so we targeted Burroughs Wellcome as well. Primarily because of the price. The drug was priced out of the reach of most people. And there were no AIDS – I mean, there wasn't the kind of assistance programs that we have now. That was part of what came out of the AIDS activist movement was assistance to pay for these damn drugs. You know, you create the only – you have a monopoly on the only supposedly lifesaving drug for AIDS, and you're holding us hostage with what seemed like outrageous prices, but subsequent drugs have showed that AZT was cheap compared to what they tried to get for the new drugs now.

AW: Right.

JB: So it was about getting drugs into the pipeline for testing. It was about confronting Burroughs Wellcome about their price gouging and holding people hostage. So we targeted the company. We targeted their other products in the pharmacies. There were pictures out there and stories about ACT UP stickers and labels—AIDS PROFITEER. We'd go into what was an Osco Drugstore – Osco was a chain of drugstores in the country and there was one at Westport Road and Main, and we would go in and just vandalize all their Burroughs Wellcome products with these unremovable labels and they had to remove them from stock. It was called civil disobedience. You could be arrested for it. You could be charged for it. They had to catch us and they had to do it. And then they had to justify why– then that creates the opportunity to tell the story. Why would you do that? Here's why we do that. Because this company is an evil profiteering corporation. So you could go and tell the media that until you're blue in the face and never get a word published in the newspaper or on T.V. You go in and get arrested for destroying public or private property, you're on the news. You get to tell your story. This is what I learned from New York and other places—that this is the role of civil disobedience and making your case to the public—to get attention, you need the media.

AW: Yeah. So many directions I want to go with this– okay. So with the civil disobedience aspect of it – let's talk a bit about civil liberties. And when it came to two names I'm going to bring up. One is Mark Sweetland and TeleCheck. And – well, maybe actually– because that happens shortly after the FDA and in early 1989. Could you talk through who Mark Sweetland was, what had happened, and the actions that ACT UP took in response?

JB: Yeah. The FDA demonstrations were not necessarily copy-cat, but they were really – we were kind of piggy backing off of New York I think. We were supporting them. When Mark Sweetland came to us with his story, it became very much a local thing for us to do, and maybe one of the earliest or first local – exclusively local issues that we addressed. And Mark had been fired from TeleCheck – sorry. I'm having to pull this – what his story was. He was – his name was so appropriate. He was such a sweet man, too. He really was. He came to us because of this – losing his job, not having any protection against discrimination because he had AIDS. And TeleCheck was a company that merchants would hire to verify check writing. And back then, people wrote checks to pay for things. And TeleCheck had built a business verifying checks for companies. It was a local company. It was based in Overland Park.

So again, we wanted to bring some attention to this issue; that somebody was being denied their right to a job because of this condition. And I'm trying to remember. We just – basically we held our protest and demonstrations and die-ins– we took them out to the company. We sat in front of their doors and we did die-ins on the sidewalks outside of the headquarters to – once again, what's the point of all this? Bring some media attention to the company. As long as they could get away with what they were doing and nobody else knew about it, let alone objected to it, what leverage did Mark have to get satisfaction? There was no law. He couldn't sue. He couldn't seek – or address it legally – a legal

system. So we created demonstrations to make a scene and give the media a story. We brought the news trucks to TeleCheck and they performed the work for us.

You know—we talked about civil disobedience and civil liberties, and there's an element of this in ACT UP, whether it was New York or Kansas City – and now I don't want to – I want to be a little careful how I word it, but a lot of it was theater. It was creating attention – things that would get attention. And there was – it was for good reason. There was – you know, we had a message. We were very good about creating the press releases and getting the message out, but the delivery vehicle was theater. It was drama. It was demonstrations. And sometimes the media would get tired of you if they don't see something new and dramatic to show on T.V.

AW: Right. Yeah. There's one quick story that I remember you telling me about, like, actual checks? – was, was that TeleCheck? Or was that – where you would like – it would cost them more money to process a check?

JB: Now, I don't know about that. I remember on – going, jumping back to Circle K, we bought single share stocks in Circle K. As a shareholder, they have to do – the law requires them to issue all these – this accounting to you as a shareholder, and you could buy a share of stock for – I'm making up the number, because I don't remember. It might have been three dollars, four dollars, whatever. So we got hundreds of people to buy single shares of stock, which really gummed up their machinery on managing – normally people would buy 1,000 shares or 10,000 shares and they were buying one, which gave you a right to vote. They have to mail you the statement, and it became very expensive.

The checks—I'm not sure if I'm remembering – is that maybe what you're thinking?

AW: Yeah. I think that's exactly what I was referring to. Yeah. Yeah. I do remember that.

JB: And that's cool. That's cool.

AW: Yeah. Yeah.

JB: TeleCheck, we– I'm trying to remember some of the other things we did besides demonstrations. It seems like we had printed some little labels for something, but – I remember the AIDS PROFITEER for Burroughs Wellcome. Stock shares for Circle K.

AW: And I have the videotape of you protesting. And maybe when we get you and David [Weeda] together, it would be fun to actually watch that and get your reactions, like, you know, to that protest.

JB: Right.

AW: But keep walking through that timeline today. So in 1989, there were a number of different protests. And do you recall also then Walmart firing an individual named Michael Poyner.

JB: Yes.

AW: Were you at the Walmart protest? Or, or-

JB: I remember the Walmart protest seemed –my participation and recollection of that was it was a much – there were protests at a store, but it was also I think – I'm not sure if it was the first time, but it was an opportunity where people could actually do things on their own. You didn't need to have 20 or 30 or 100 people. You –we printed out a lot of – excuse me a second here.

AW: Oh, yeah. No. That's okay.

JB: We printed a lot of fliers and leaflets that people could go, and the neat thing about Walmart, you could just unobtrusively walk into a store, whether it was down Lake of the Ozarks or Sedalia, Missouri, or some of these, you know – instead of being right in the middle of a city, we could go out anywhere in the state or region and go into their department with sheets or towels or whatever and just bury these pamphlets and stuff throughout the store. You could go in and in 30 minutes put 100 leaflets, and they would have to take the store apart to find them all. So it was a way of disseminating the story about our list of complaints or demands with Walmart to their customers. And they couldn't really do anything to stop it. It was a very –I liked it a lot because you could just keep these things in your car, and as you're going somewhere, stop at a Walmart and do your droppings and move on. And it was fairly low risk. But-

AW: Right. All right. Perfect. Okay we're going to take a quick break in the recording.

[Recording pauses]
[Recording resumes]

AW: Okay. So before I ask you anything about moving into the Human Rights Ordinance Project, is there anything in particular regarding ACT UP that I haven't asked you about or that you remember doing – maybe I will actually try to bring up something. For instance, did you ever do anything on the state level? David recalls traveling to Jeff City. Or that might have been part of – did you ever do anything that was not just AIDS activism? And I'm specifically asking about Choice. Like, you know, women's right to choose. Or was that more David?

JB: Definitely more David. I think there was – ACT UP as – I'm trying to remember if it was ever officially discussed and consensed in ACT UP. And I'm pretty sure that we did make – take a stand, make a position in favor of a woman's right to choose. That these were allies, that these were people in –that our struggles were – shared a lot in common. That we had a lot of the same – I don't want to say enemies. Targets. You know, opposition. That these were our friends. Because women came to – were so involved in the earliest efforts to help men with AIDS. I think there was a real affinity. I want to use that word carefully, because ACT UP also had what they called affinity groups, and I'm using the

word a little differently right now. There was an affinity with the Choice movement. I don't know anybody in ACT UP who was anti-choice. Now, how official that became, I – that I struggle with a little bit more. But it does – it wouldn't surprise me that we actually made an official statement to that effect. I don't know. I don't really remember for sure. It wouldn't surprise me at all.

AW: Okay.

JB: I would trust David's recollection on that one.

AW: Well, and I definitely – and I remember David traveled definitely to Jeff City once and I didn't know if you had been with him.

JB: Can we take one more quick break? I'm getting chilled a bit-

[recording pauses]
[recording resumes]

AW: So talking through – being in ACT UP, you have in the past talked to me about – well, you just mentioned affinity groups. And it's a consensus organization, which we've talked about, you know, can lead to differences of opinion. And by the end of 1989, as you and David meet with Michael Bates and others for an ordinance, let me ask it this way: Were there tensions – because I don't want to lead. Were there tensions within ACT UP? And did you find yourself at any point beginning to feel maybe like your time with them would eventually come to an end?

JB: Let me, let me just share that I – throughout the time I was with ACT UP, I never tested positive. I frequently got tested one, two, three times a year maybe. I tested frequently. Because, you know, I just totally – I lost almost everybody around me. Everyone I knew was positive. I just couldn't even imagine that I was not. I was just certain that I was positive. But every time I went and tested, it kept coming back negative. And so I've always felt like I was effected by HIV, too.

And somebody in ACT UP, because so many of the guys were positive, pretty much kind of called me out about my position. My opinion didn't have as much weight as somebody who was HIV positive. And I really bristled at that at first, and I didn't – I don't know. I think it made me pull back and ask myself whether that was a legitimate thing to tell me. You know, maybe they're right. I want to defer to–if a person's really living with HIV, are they overreacting or whatever? And I struggled with it for quite a while, but I came to a place for myself where it's like it's not for me to decide that. If they – If this is how the majority of these men feel, then I have to accept that. It's their lives, it's their struggle, it's their fight. And I can be an ally, I can be a supporter, but I can't speak as if I'm a person affected with HIV. And ACT UP was – I think a lot of people assumed I was HIV positive. That was the assumption. When I first ran for City Council at the very first public event over here at Metro North Shopping Center less than a mile from where I live

now, and I can't remember if it was Connie or Karen, one of the Barbie dolls from hell – Connie was running for public office, too. I'm sure that was Connie. Or is it Karen?

AW: I actually think in that election it might have been Regina Dinwiddie.

JB: Oh, I think you're right. Thank you.

AW: Yeah.

JB: They all look alike to me.

AW: When Connie ran later-

JB: You know one white right wing fundamentalist guy, you know them all. Yeah. No. She called out quite clearly and publicly in front of an audience, "Don't be kissing any babies, Jon. You might give them AIDS." You know, so there was this perception that I had HIV and AIDS. But I was negative. So I came to a point for myself of saying, this is no longer– this institution, ACT UP really belongs to the people who are affected. So there's not – not that I won't support it or be involved. It's just I don't – it should be represented by somebody who's actually living with HIV. Not me. So I felt like it was time for move on, move out, step down. And that didn't – again, that wasn't something that happened in a day or a week. It was over a longer period of weeks or maybe months that I started pulling back and out.

And simultaneously – I mean, that was a personal thing going on for me. But there were things going on in the group as well that I probably would have pulled out no matter what, because that was the – do I want to go there now? The affinity groups. With ACT UP it was a consensus group. So if one person said no, the group [ACT UP] would not move forward. It had to be all or nothing. But there was a subset of people when they didn't – when their proposal didn't get accepted by the group, they proceeded to do their action anyway, and they called themselves an affinity group. To me, it was a bit of slippery conniving to – you know, if you couldn't get consensus you would–this was the work around. "We'll just act as an affinity group. To hell with what the group decided. We're going to do this anyway. If the group says we can't burn a Vatican flag, we'll let an affinity group do it."

So it became really – you know, think about it. If that's not the definition of politics, you know, what is? "If I can't do it this way, I'll do it another way." And that rubbed me the wrong way. To me, that kind of defied the spirit of the group. And it did cause conflict and it added to my sense of leaving. I don't-

AW: Well, then you mentioned when you were saying later on about –and I actually forgot to bring up a very important event that we've talked about in the past. In the middle of 1989, Target City Hall. And I've got the videotape of it. [In] *The Kansas City Star*, there's "Jon D. Barnett is an angry young man." And you're out there on the front steps of City Hall and you're calling out Mayor Berkley and his AIDS Council. And we haven't talked about

that yet— about funding. And you had talked earlier about–there was the “drugs into bodies now,” but on the local level –the AIDS council was I think comprised of people that were at least trying to do something, as far as that was the purpose of the council. But clearly ACT UP had a problem with them. On that day, what was it like to have such a big gathering out on the steps of City Hall? And why was Jon D. Barnett such an angry young man? Or was he not, and The Star got it wrong?

JB: Wow. I have always loved that story. I spent hours talking to the reporter. Is that Lynn Horsley or Barb Shelly? Lynn or Barbara. And when I first saw that, I was really kind of taken aback by it. I was like, “after all the things we talked about, this was your takeaway for the lead on that story?” You know, that's the first sentence of the first article that was ever written about me in Kansas City. “He's an angry young man.” And not, you know – I couldn't argue with that. It was really very truthful. I was. I really was. I didn't know that it was so – that that was what people took away from what I was doing. “He's mad. He's angry.” You know. That was a little weird.

But since then, with time—and not too long after that, I sort of really put it on as a badge of honor. “Damn right, I'm mad.” That’s the problem. Enough of you aren't angry. Shades of Larry Kramer if you're familiar with him. I'm not – I do not want to be compared to Larry Kramer for the most part, but in that respect, fair. I'll take that. You know. We should be angry. And as far as the AIDS Council is concerned, it was a typical politician's answer to ducking a hard issue and a crisis. We needed funding, we needed services, we needed help. “Let’s appoint a council. Let's study this. Let's look at it. Let's” – fuck no. We've been dealing with this for years and–you can edit the fuck out later—when we've been dealing with this for years as ad hoc community based nonprofit organizations that are totally overwhelmed and swamped. This is a community that's being slayed, and we're taking care of our own. We don't have time and energy to also require— you know, you know – so, so I felt like the council was a throwaway. Yeah, there were some good people on the AIDS Council. Some well intentioned people. But it was headed by Marianne Kramer who was a socialite; no administrative experience, no experience with dealing with crises. The biggest crises is what are you going to put on the banquet table for the Thanksgiving dinner, you know? This was the woman heading this organization. And I'm – yeah, am I angry? I'm not only angry, I'm willing to be rude and confrontational because we need people that will get things done. And this – Berkeley was our Reagan, you know. A little lip service and you're on your own, folks. We were not getting services; we were not getting funding. We got a council. We got an AIDS Council with a big name on it. It was impotent. It was useless. Had some potential, but, but it never – it wasn't manifesting.

AW: Okay. So on that day, in 1989-

JB: Wow.

AW: …yeah, you called for funding, you called for an anti-discrimination ordinance. And that – I think we're going to move into the Human Rights Ordinance Project finally. But the

last thing just about that day. I mean, I'm not wanting to lead, but you said to me before, that that was probably the peak moment of your time in ACT UP?

JB: Yeah. Yeah.

AW: Yeah. Was it – what did it mean to bring together that many people on that day?

JB: Oh, my god. You know, I don't know where it rates in there in terms of other demonstrations in Kansas City. I – it's probably a huge mistake on my part, because I wasn't here during the civil rights demonstrations and stuff, so I don't – I really can't speak to what those were like. I remember seeing media reports even out in Colby, but I had never seen reports of a crowd like that at City Hall. I think it's – it really is up there in terms of one of the key demonstrations in Kansas City. And when you look at what proceeded out of that over the next—however many years, handful of years, you know, it was clearly – I think in hindsight– dare I say bifurcation point again? You know, it was a key moment. Something started turning there. We had been going in this valley and this was sort of – at least we were – at least we bottomed out and started finding our strength and our –I think we started discovering we really were a community in other ways than just the social side. I don't know if there was an awareness at that moment—maybe somewhat—but there was a political community here as well.

AW: Yeah. And speaking of politics, you've talked about – and in fact, you just used the word theater earlier when it came to ACT UP. So we have anger, we have theater, in your face type of tactics. And you've put it this way in the past that it got to a point where you had to put on a suit and tie. [*JB laughs*] There was a shift. And so what shifts into – when does it become that you decide that maybe a little bit of the insider route is the way to go?

JB: Well, well – yeah. Now I'm the one that's having several thoughts on all of this.

AW: Go with whatever-

JB: One is, one is about – and again, bring me back to the suit and tie, please, if I go too far off here. One of the things about – with the work with ACT UP and stuff was I think of the reactions we got from some key people that were prominent, either politically or socially people like Marianne Kramer or Sandy Berkley or others who got – or Katheryn Shields, for that matter, got incredibly angry at ACT UP and at me for things I wrote or said or said about them. And I guess my question is: if we weren't being effective, why would they be angry? If we had not accomplished the goal of bringing some attention and exposing this lethargy, this ineptitude to the public, to the media, why would they be critical and angry? I mean, they got angry, too. They got angry at my anger and the group's anger. So that was just one – that's just one thing I'm thinking about the things that – the response and actions I'm remembering from Marianne Kramer or from Sandy Berkley or from Katheryn Shields. That sometimes it seems like we just had to push them to a point of such discomfort and criticism from the media that they had to kind of lash back. So that was one thought.

The suit and tie, that was –I think it's pretty obvious that that was when David and I presented to the finance committee the need for a civil – an anti-discrimination ordinance. And that, again, something—nobody had told us how this works. Nobody told us how to do this. We were acting up with the consent of ACT UP to go and make a presentation. Presentation means you have to – you know, we knew we had to hand them something on paper. We had to make our case. And that these are – publicly, these are the people who sit in suits and ties. This is what they do. And you can't go in there with a raggy t-shirt and blue jeans and expect to have their attention or respect. So I borrowed a suit. I didn't have one. I borrowed a suit and put on a tie. It was almost as weird as putting on a dress. You know, it felt like drag. You know, it's like, this is not me. But you know, by the end of the day, it's amazing. It's sort of like, okay. Now I know what this feels like and it's not as awkward or uncomfortable. I look pretty good in a suit and a tie. I can do this. And I can-

You know, another thing happened and I think it was at one of the City Hall– I know it was one of – I don't know which one—demonstrations. And that was somebody came into the group of protesters and sought me out, and kind of, as I recall it, pulled me to the side or got into a one-on-one where there wasn't a lot of people listening to us, and said, "You know, they really want – the City Council—there are people in City Hall who agree with you and want to do something. They just don't know what to do. And you'd get a whole lot more done if you would come over onto this side instead of standing out here yelling. They're ready to talk." And it was the most incredible – I mean, it was like a little light bulb going off and saying, "Oh, thank God. You know, This is great news." I don't want to – I don't remember who this person was anymore. It was probably a Council aid I think. I wish that I had paid a little closer attention, because it was so out of the blue and it was in the middle of a demonstration. My attention was divided with all these other things. I don't know that it really even hit me at that moment or if it was sort of an hour later or that evening I'm thinking, "Hmm, you know, what was I just – who just delivered this little nugget of information to me?" You know, I don't want to be melodramatic here – but, yeah. I do want to be melodramatic. Somebody sneaking across the lines in war and whispering something from the other side. "They want to talk. They want to talk." You know? [*laughing*] But you've got to send an envoy. You've got to give them – they don't know how to do it.

AW: Right.

JB: They need – they want help.

AW: Yeah. No-

JB: "Are you going to stand out here and yell? Or are you going to come in and help? Are you going to keep pushing? Or are you going to come in and pull?"

AW: Right.

JB: And it was just sort of another – you know, none of this was stuff I was prepared to or trained to do in my childhood, or my life, or my education. It just – it was serendipity. This was a good example of the things that happened through these years of – you just – you learn as you go, and it becomes something that's valuable in your life and other ways. I don't know.

AW: Yeah.

JB: I don't want to get too sappy, philosophical here. Just-

AW: I've got you. It's okay. And I'm thinking, especially because we're a little later in the day and we're going to be doing a joint interview with you and David Weeda. And I think we'll probably use that opportunity to really kind of dive into Human Rights Ordinance Project and-

JB: Perfect.

AW: …and we don't have to use today to unpack that.

JB: Right.

AW: So maybe what we can do to wrap up, maybe like another, you know, ten or 15 minutes at the most, is since we've been on the topic of ACT UP, and because there are also many people that aren't around to tell their stories anymore, and you talked about confrontational actions with ACT UP, and we've talked about Mark Chaney before. I just wanted to get a sense of your memories of how he – I don't – again, I don't want to be leading as far as that. But he, you know, smashed a vile of blood on the ground. He was one of the guys that set the Vatican flag on fire. And-

JB: Talk about an angry young man. Mark made me look like a saint. Mark had so much anger. So much anger. And Mark was – if I'm straightforward, Mark was brutal and could be so confrontational. But one of the wonderful things about Mark, you never wondered what he thought. You never wondered how he felt. He was so honest and so passionate. He drove me batshit crazy. I also loved him dearly. We disagreed on tactics. We never disagreed on the cause. But we did have a separation at one point. Like some of the others, we weren't close friends. It used to be in the heyday, we'd go out and leaflet the bars, and we'd go have a drink. We were great friends and buddies. We laughed together. That came to an end. We – I don't think that we would likely call ourselves close friends, some of us. That broke down because of our differences of opinions on some other things. It's hard to be friends with somebody you disagree with a lot or you disagree strongly with.

But something happened with Mark that a lot of people don't know about. And – yeah. I'm talking to some of the other guys who were in ACT UP that are – if they're listening, if this even gets aired. After I became positive in '98—I did test positive and was seeking care at one of the AIDS specialists in Kansas City who happened to be Mark's doctor, as

well. And this doctor had a personal fitness gym, and I was seeing a personal trainer several – a few times a week. Well, Mark was also needing this kind of – you know, do some working out and training. And Mark's health had really deteriorated badly. And we pooled resources so that he could afford to get the services of this personal trainer and I worked out with Mark in this gym. And with Michael [JB's partner]. And we reestablished a bond through that. And at this point, Mark was really getting weak and I don't know – I don't know. I wonder what contact he still had with some of these other ACT UP-ers, because my sense was that they weren't really – that Mark was pretty alone at this point. And I know I'll never forget the day that Dr. Nemacheck [phonetic 01:27:32] came into the gym really haggered looking and drained and told us that Mark had passed the night before and that he was at a loss. Every organ in his body just shut down. He said, "I don't know what happened. What-" I'm like, "God, you were sending this guy every drug out there and-" It just was one of the more profound losses in the ocean of losses. Because there was this friendship, then this falling away, and then this sort of reconnection that I would like to think that maybe was unique. I don't know if it was or not. But it was for me. I don't know – I don't really know – it wasn't like we were intimately close again or anything. Just it was – I'm happy. I'm glad that I was reconnected before he passed, because Mark [*laughs*] – despite our differences, he knew how to get attention. And he was fearless. I'll – I have nothing but admiration for the man.

AW: Yeah. Well, I don't know. I'm – I don't know if you're feeling it, too, that we've gone real heavy on today. We could probably pick up from here at another time and just – and we'll see if things get-

JB: I never have trouble picking up wherever – you know. And you might need time to – I mean, I don't know what you're – I don't know why you're gathering so many minutes and hours of stuff. You're just creating so much more work for yourself.

AW: Well, it's – you know, it's a labor of love, I suppose. It's an important story, and you know that. I do want to say just while we're here, and I'll – because I'll go as long as you want to go. I just don't want you to get worn out or feel – but just sticking with ACT UP or moving into the – yeah—I think the Human Rights Ordinance Project and your run for office are such big topics, it would be better to do it at another time. It's just wrapping up then—I mean, when and how did – you know, was it an immediate moment? Or just kind of a falling out gradually with ACT UP and the way in which you remember it?

JB: It was – I think it was gradual. I think my transitioning from ACT UP to Human Rights Ordinance Project was –it wasn't a sudden thing. I think I told you when I was told that my status put me in a different level than people who were positive, that was a pretty immediate piece of information, but I stopped participating in the decision making. I stopped being a spokesperson, but I continued to support ACT UP and that effort in whatever ways I could. I'd go to demonstrations; I'd go to protests. But I also was– there were things I had started doing as co-chair of ACT UP—co-director of ACT UP—that I wanted to continue. And that's going to these AIDS meetings. Whether it was the AIDS

Council or the Health Department, board meetings at Good Samaritan Project. And it seems like there was another organization that I was involved with.

AW: Yeah.

JB: So that – I know– I just – you said – you – I don't even like hearing my name, because I don't think it was always about me, but you're asking about me, and so Jon D. Barnett had a role he was playing and it was multifaceted. It involved ACT UP. It involved other organizations. It involved the News Telegraph at one point. It involved a City Council run. And so none of those – today we go back and give them these names; "Your council run, the ordinance project." But back then, it wasn't like that. They weren't so easily distinguished. They just – one just sort of rolled over to another, and there might have been a time or two when it – you know, it did a little dance before it, you know – are we going to do this? Are we going to do that? You know. So it's not easy for me to, to – it was my life, so I – you're asking me, like, what's about this and, you know, about that? I'm not that compartmentalized. It was just – I just found myself in a movie and I'm just trying to keep up with the scene changes, you know. Seriously.

AW: Yeah.

JB: It was –if people think this was like I had this intent and this plan, game plan, it would be really a silly thing to think, because this was my life playing out and I was just trying to keep up with it. I don't know how to make it make sense to anybody else. It doesn't make sense to me. How could I possibly explain it to another person?

AW: Yeah.

JB: I'm just along for the ride. Still am. I still don't know what the fuck's going on. You laugh.

AW: No, I know what you're saying.

JB: No, you don't. If you do, tell me, because I don't know what I'm saying. [*both laughing*]

AW: Well, you're fine. I actually think this is probably the perfect jumping off point, because we've covered great stuff today. And we're going to do-

JB: I think I'm more tired than I realize and punching. I think you're right.

AW: Yeah. Let's [crosstalk 01:33:10].

JB: I'm going to trust your judgment, because it's like, I think the Human Rights Project stuff, David would be a great – I would love to sidekick with him again on that one.

AW: [Crosstalk 01:33:20].

JB: But the Council run, you know, that to me is sort of a – that's something that no one else can quite talk about the way I can. You know, because that really was – I mean, there were a lot of people involved, but that was, that was Jon D. Barnett for City Council, you know.

AW: Right.

JB: It's so funny to hear that, you know. It's just weird to-

AW: Yeah. Well, we'll-

JB: But there's – I've got the yard sign. You know, like, okay. Yeah. No. That really happened, you know?

AW: Yeah. It absolutely did. Yeah. Let's pick it all up again at another time. I've got some thoughts on how to go about those, too.

JB: Okay.

AW: But, but just as far as the GLAMA Oral History Project and this interview on November 16, 2017, we're just going to wrap it up here. And Jon, thank you so much for your time.

JB: Thank you for what you're doing.

AW: Appreciate it.