Gil Kudrin (Nightsweats & T-Cells)

August 4, 2023
Interview with Gil Kudrin
Interviewed by Cameron Wood
Ohio History Connection, 800 E 17th Ave, Columbus, OH 43211

GK = Gil Kudrin, CW = Cameron Wood

CW: Hello, I'm Cameron Wood here at the Ohio History Connection with Gil Kudrin, today is August 4, 2023 and we're going to be talking about his experiences in the '70's and '80's coming out as a gay man and discussing AIDS and that reality. Mr. Kudrin, could you please say and spell your name for me?

GK: Yes, my name is Gil Kudrin.

CW: Where and when were you born?

GK: I was born in March of 1958 in Lorain, Ohio.

CW: What was growing up in Lorain Ohio like?

GK: Growing up in Lorain Ohio was actually, it was a great place to grow up. I grew up pretty much in the shadow of the steel plants in the '60's and had lots of friends. Fortunately, I had a really good public library system and school system and I spent a lot of time in the library reading. A lot of time out in the woods, camping. The nice thing about Lorain is that you are never far from a rural area. I had a lot of friends who I'm still in contact with. I was talking to somebody who I went to kindergarten with last night. So we're an unusual bunch, we're all still in touch with each other sixty years later. So it was a good life, it was a rough place to grow up. Fortunately, I grew up in a place and time though that one would not have expected to be accepting of gay people but Lorain was at that time very racially mixed and ethnically mixed. The biggest event of our lives every year was the international festival and everybody from all over eastern Europe, from Puerto Rico, from Mexico from anywhere in the world, we would have floats, we would have a big parade we would have a week-long festival where there would be dancing, cultural events and food from every culture imaginable. So we grew up celebrating diversity in the '60's. Not what most people did in steel towns. So I knew a gay couple that my parents were friends with that were openly gay and were always invited to all of the weddings and Christmas parties and events. So I had role models, it was very unusual for a gay man in the '60's growing up, a gay kid growing up.

CW: What did your parents do for a living?

GK: My mother very rarely worked. My father was a cop and he was only a cop for about 8 and ½ years and outside of that he really didn't work much at all. My parents were both very challenged and very challenging. I actually left my parent's home when I was 14. It's kind of, as I've lived through my life, realized that my childhood was in some ways basic training for trauma. So I took what good out of it I could. My friends were more my family than my biological family.

CW: And how early did you know that you were gay?

GK: Kindergarten, I don't know, before? I for sure knew in kindergarten. There's a kid in my kindergarten class that I had a crush on and he apparently had a crush on me and we had a couple years that we would hang around together and be together all the time and then he moved and I remember watching the moving van driving away and crying, knowing that I'd lost my buddy.

CW: You mentioned that you had, it was odd that you had gay role models early on. What was the earliest that you were aware of those role models or aware that there was, when were you aware of straight and gay, as things?

GK: I think all through grade school. I think from kindergarten on and the couple that I mentioned stayed together until I was in high school, the end of my high school years. And they taught, I would play instruments, my father was Croatian and I would play instruments from Croatia and we took lessons in those. And these guys had gone to Duquesne University which is where they met and they were in a cultural musical group so they taught the Croatian dance classes on Saturdays. And all our parents would leave us with these two gay men all day on Saturdays to learn the dances. It just was a normal part of our life that there were gay people and there were straight people and my grandfather had a saloon across from the steel plant and as I got older I realized more and more a lot of his clientele were gay people. It just was an accepting place. It wasn't a gay bar it just was an accepting place where anybody was accepted and nobody made a big deal out of it. It's really odd, I still to this day think it's really odd that I did not grow up with stigma around being gay.

CW: Were there any gay organizations in the area?

GK: No, it wasn't really even talked about, it just was accepted. Nobody said a thing, I mean I had boyfriends throughout high school and junior high school and I'm still

friends with the same people that I was friends with then from school and nobody ever seemed to care.

CW: Does it remain a fairly gay friendly place?

GK: I don't know, I don't spend much time there. I left Lorain when I was 17. Moved to Lakewood which was the gayest suburb in Ohio at the time. We even made, it was the answer to a question in the original Trivial Pursuit "where was the highest percentage population of gay people between New York and Chicago or between New York and LA" and it was Lakewood, Ohio. My mom had been from Lakewood and I ended up spending my senior year in high school there. I was grateful for that.

CW: You said you moved out of your parent's home at 14.

GK: At 14 yeah.

CW: Did you move in with relatives?

GK: I did for a while, yes. And then on my own for a while. I took my parents to court and had myself made a ward of the state and lived with one of my father's half brothers and his wife and kids for a while.

CW: So your mom was from Lakewood, is that what took you there or were you aware of the gay community there.

GK: No my parents moved back there and I went to try and take care of my little brothers a bit. So I ended up staying there for my senior year and then just have stayed in the area my whole life.

CW: Moving to Lakewood at 17, what was your, were there gay organizations there? Was this a place where you got more involved in the gay community?

GK: Not at first, it was kind of my first taste of homophobia, surprisingly, with a lot of gay people in Lakewood, even in '75-76. Lakewood high school was very different than where I went to school in Lorain and there was overt homophobia which I had never experienced before. And I was there for my senior year and then went to Kent State for my Freshman year so I found both places to be pretty oppressive. I lived in a dorm at Kent. You're living with 72 other guys in a dorm. It can be really dangerous. My floor had 72 guys and there were 4 floors. You have to share bathrooms and showers together and it can be a dangerous environment for somebody who is openly gay. And I realized that right away and just appropriately protected myself.

CW: Did you remain fairly open at Kent State?

GK: No, it was too dangerous to do that then. I did reach out to the gay and lesbian group that was on campus. I had met a couple openly gay men who were a little bit older than me in Lakewood so one of them came down and took me to a gay bar in Akron, my freshman year so I went once to a place called The Old Plantation. And I had been to a gay bar at 17 in Cleveland called Tracks. When I went to the gay organizational meeting at Kent State in the student center, they had a big sign in the window, this is '76, which was great but I went and there was a small group of guys maybe 15, 18 guys and they were talking, it was a group setting and they were talking about being gay. And most of them were really horrified that they were gay or sad about it and I was always very shy. And they got to me and they were like 'why did you come here today?' And I said "well I've known I'm gay my whole life and to be fair, I'm just looking for a date." [laughs] " But you guys seem pretty sad, I'm not sad about being gay, I'm happy about being gay." So I never went back to another meeting. I don't want to be sad about being gay. I wasn't sad about it ever.

CW: What were you studying at Kent State?

GK: I actually started as a psych major, it's not where I ended up. It was probably just my way into finding a good therapist. [laughs] Which I probably needed after childhood.

CW: You were taking courses and going to meetings in order to find people. Just to find people, yeah.

GK: I went to the student counseling center I think the second day I was on campus. And I was like "Yeah I probably need some help." I had some stuff I need to deal with. And in light of the coming storm of AIDS it's a really really good thing I did.

CW: So how was the transition to college for you ?

GK: It was rough because, financially, I was not independent, it was scary and I was a very shy kid. I had very low self esteem. So I wouldn't go the route of taking student loans because I didn't have the belief system that I could ever pay them back. That I would be employable enough to pay back the loans, so I ended up dropping out of Kent and going on to Cleveland State part time and getting a job and working a job for a long time. And then just going to school at night.

CW: How old were you at Kent State before you left.

GK: I was there, we were on quarters then, so I did my whole Freshman year and then came back my Sophomore year for the fall quarter and then dropped out. My family was having lots of problems and I was still needing to take care of my two youngest brothers so I quit school, went back, got a job at Lakewood Hospital. I had been working there during the summer before so I just went back full time and started going to Cleveland State at night.

CW: At this time did you move into Cleveland then?

GK: Yeah I moved into Lakewood. Got an apartment in Lakewood and I knew there were gay bars so that year, like '78 was the second time I went to a gay bar in Cleveland. I met a guy that night that I ended up staying with for probably about 3 ½ years.

CW: And how was the experience of the gay community in Cleveland at that time?

GK: I didn't have a lot of experience with it. I had just a couple of gay friends and when I met the guy that night, I stayed with him for a long time in a monogamous, well I was in a monogamous relationship, he was not. But I stayed with him for about 3 ½ years and we would go out dancing a lot. He loved to go out to the bars and dance. I loved dancing, I made friends with people a little bit. And we formed a circle of friends some of whom I still know but most of whom died. Almost all of them died. But Tracks was a very popular bar in Cleveland. It was actually named one of the top ten discos in the United States for 5 or 8 years. So it would attract a lot of people from New York, from Montreal, from Toronto, from Pittsburg. Even though Columbus had a larger young population because of Ohio State, Cleveland had the more chic bars and as a result, it ended up that Cleveland was the hardest hit and the first hit city with the AIDS pandemic in Ohio. And very often times you would hear of people who were in from New York City or Montreal or something like that who were just in Cleveland for the weekend to dance, Tracks was that legendary.

CW: Can you describe Tracks for me? A lot of people from Cleveland have talked about Tracks, it was a very popular place. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

GK: The movies you've seen about Studio 54? Just change that to Tracks. It was extraordinary, it was an energy that I've never seen duplicated anywhere in Ohio. We had a second club called Dimensions, it was very popular. People would go back and forth and then over the years little bars opened up but Tracks just had the legendary feel that places like Studio 54, The Saint have in London, those kind of bars. Regines in Paris, St. Charles Place in Toronto. There were a dozen of them scattered around

the northern hemisphere and Tracks was one of them. It just had the perfect lighting, the best dance floor. The energy, the DJs had the most amazing energy. And it wasn't, it's odd, you didn't go out and dance as a couple. It was like the community was dancing together. It was this mass of celebration. It would go on 'till 5 in the morning. And it was more about dancing than the sex and drugs and all that. I mean that did happen a lot. Not so much the drugs for me or the sex. I'm what I would call a serial monogamist. But it was just such a joyful place to be. There was, years later, when I had started working at Nightsweats & T-cells there was an event in Cleveland called Dancing in the Streets and my business partner at Nightsweats & T-cells said "Hey, can you find out who's doing that? They're printing shirts for that event, we're not printing them. Maybe we can get a chance to bid on the product." So I tracked down who was doing it, made an appointment to see her, walked in the door and I was like "Oh my god!" And she just walked over and hugged me and I hugged her and we had known each other for years. We had danced next to each other for years and years at Tracks, never spoken a word to each other, never knew what each other's name was but we were friends, we were community. We had danced dozens and dozens of hours together. She ended up moving down here to Columbus but we started printing their shirts and I stayed in touch with her until she died a few years ago here in Columbus. That's just what Tracks was, you were just loved, everybody that was on the dance floor was, it was a celebration of life. Stonewall had happened and we were finally being a little more free and safe, we thought. There was nobody in downtown Cleveland after six o'clock but gay bars, gay people, lesbians, prostitutes and drug dealers. We had the run of the city and oftentimes, I didn't drive, oftentimes me and a friend would walk from Tracks on West 9th over to Dimensions on East 9th and you didn't worry about it because there was just nobody downtown. And you didn't have to worry about people spotting you or outing you. There was nobody downtown, it was ours, we had the run of the place, it was amazing.

CW: How was discrimination or homophobia in Cleveland at that time? In your community it seems pretty safe but in the city as a whole did it feel safe?

GK: I never worried about it. I was always physically fit. I was much more muscular when I was younger. I knew how to run, I was a distance runner in High School and continued throughout most of my life. But the homophobia, it could happen but one of the most telling things was when Trivial Pursuit came out, that question about Lakewood, there was a running back and forth monologue in the Sunday Plain Dealer magazine that went on for weeks and weeks. Where people that were homophobic were disputing that there were so many gay people in Lakewood and there weren't that many gay people this and that and finally the last letter that I remember was somebody said, the Winton Place, which is a huge highrise right on the lake, that if every gay person that lived in the Winton Place went on their balcony and flapped

their arms up and down that that the Winton Place would take off and fly across Lake Erie. [laughs] That that's how many gay people there were. So there was homophobia, we didn't pay much attention to it.

CW: And how was working at Lakewood Hospital?

GK: That was different, particularly after HIV started. I was outed not long after I started working there. My grandfather had worked at Lakewood for 43 years and he was well respected. Many of the people who worked there had other family members working there. My mother worked there for 25 years, I worked there for 20 years. And somebody outed me about being gay and I faced a lot of discrimination in the workplace. And then with the start of AIDS it only intensified and got far worse. And at some point Lakewood, I know for a fact, there was a meeting in the administrative end of things where they made a conscious decision that they were not going to become the AIDS hospital. They did not want to become the AIDS hospital and they would simply not treat people well and people would just go elsewhere. This is all happening at a time when, for me, I got sick very early on. The man that I met the second time that I went to a bar in Cleveland. Both were Tracks. The first one at 17th, was in a different place, that place ended up burning down and they built on west 9th. So I actually went the day after my birthday and I met him and we were together for a couple months and he got very ill and he ended up in the hospital. There was no internet then, no cell phones and I lost contact with him for a week and I was kind of panicky. And I got a call from his father and he said "I have no idea who you are or how you know my son but you're obviously really important to him and he's in Marymount Hospital and he is deathly ill and they want to do a surgery on him which he won't have. And if he doesn't have the surgery he's going to die and would you come in and talk to him? He said he wanted to talk to you." And it ended up being a 2 ½ hour bus ride for me, I didn't drive. I was really poor, wasn't getting raises because I was gay. I was told that by my boss. And I get to Marymount. They wanted to perform an ileostomy on him so he would wear a bag, it would be temporary. He had some Crohn's disease or something, they couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. And he ended up having the surgery and he was in intensive care for about a month-and-a-half and he ended up getting out. And it took a few months for us to be together again, for him to be healthy enough. And we traveled up to Niagara Falls and on to Toronto for a long weekend. It was in '78 and we had a really nice weekend together, he was about 5 years older than me. And I didn't know that he had been traveling to New York to go to the bath houses since he was about 16 years old. And after that weekend when we got home, I got deathly ill. I was sicker than I've ever been in my life and we had no idea what was wrong. But my best friend at the hospital was one of our top admitting doctors. And he kept following me the next couple years doing blood work on me, just unable to figure out what was ongoing

and what was wrong with me. I started getting all kinds of weird infections and I'd get shingles and they'd be infected with Staph (Staphylococcus) and then I'd get a Strep (streptococcus) infection and that would clear up and I'd get another Staph infection or I'd get a respiratory infection. I was exposed to so many things in the hospital, I was in the maintenance department and we would have to go everywhere. And my friend never got better. His health just got worse on and off. They ended up redoing the surgery, which they had hoped that his colon would heal enough they would be able to do that. It probably was CMV (Cytomegalovirus) Colitis, nobody knew. Now historically we know that HIV was actually very prevalent in New York City in the mid '70's. So when he was at the height of his sexual prowess and trips to New York City and going to bath houses, HIV was already very prevalent there. So I can pinpoint the weekend I was infected.

CW: What year would that have been?

GK: 1978 [pauses] I have pictures of the trip.

CW: Had you heard anything about any kind of disease or strangeness?

GK: Him and I stayed friends after we broke up. But after three years, we had broken up and, I say I'm a serial monogamist, but I was very sexually active in between long term relationships. But I was living on my own and him and I were friends, we still talked to each other everyday. And I remember the night they did the first announcement on the news about HIV. And I was sitting alone in my apartment, having my dinner, watching TV and I just knew. I absolutely knew, you know, that the symptoms they were talking about, enlarged lymph nodes and different kinds of infections and rashes and shingles and pneumonias were all things that I had been battling for years. And my lymph nodes had, when I got infected that weekend my lymph nodes had gone up. And we had a doctor who would take care of the employees at work and she said "oh your lymph nodes are swollen again." And I'm thinking " Not still, not again." And I got on the phone with Mark and said "did you hear what they said on the news tonight?" And he said "oh they've just given it a name." He said "this shit's been going around for years." He said "there's people I know from the bath houses that died." He said "you watch, they'll end up saying this has been around for years." I thought he was nuts. But that had never been a part of my cultural experience in the gay community but it had been with his and he had already been losing friends. They just hadn't given it a name. Turned out he was right.

CW: At that time they were calling it GRID, right?

GK: Yeah, first it had no name then it was Gay Related Immunodeficiency syndrome so it was GRID. Very little information, very panicked people at Lakewood Hospital. In every hospital but my experience was there in what was already a very homophobic atmosphere. And I had an openly gay black friend who was also a maintenance man. We would go into the cafeteria with our lunch trays and sit at a table and six people would get up and walk away. That was not uncommon so we just started going out to lunch everyday. To little restaurants right around the hospital because we couldn't eat in the cafeteria comfortably.

CW: Do you remember the first AIDS patient that came into Lakewood?

GK: I remember hearing about it, yeah. I remember hearing about it and then, understand that there were no tests or anything early on. You know this started in '81 that we recognized it. But the HIV tests didn't happen until I think it was '85? We would have people come in with pneumocystis or whatever kind of pneumonia or toxoplasmosis or PML (Progressive Multifocal Leukoencephalopathy) . And if somebody came in with PML they would be dead within a couple days. If somebody came in with pneumocystis they would generally not be treated well. The guy who ended up being my main HIV doctor was at University Hospital and he told me later he said "I had to regularly send ambulances to Lakewood to rescue my patients who lived in Lakewood, would get sick, be taken there in an ambulance and who knew they weren't getting care and so I would get them transferred over to University." And at University some of the nurses got together and banded together and asked if they could become the AIDS ward. Like if they could set aside a special ward where they could all work, where they could take care of us.

And my best friend, he became like a father to me, he was our top admitting doctor, he was a pulmonary specialist. And he joined me in a healthy bit of denial that I couldn't have AIDS because I would take antibiotics and I would get better and of course people with AIDS didn't get better, they'd just die. That is what we knew at the beginning stages and it didn't make sense to worry and then when the tests came out it didn't make sense to get tested because there was no treatment at all. And I had started volunteering at the free medical clinic in Cleveland on the East side on Euclid Avenue. I worked the Crisis Intervention Hotline on Saturday nights and I made a lot of friends at the free clinic. The training was amazing and I knew people throughout the free clinic system in Cleveland. So one of my friends ran the lab at McCafferty Health Center on the West side and they did a lot of testing there and I talked to him about it. And he was Haitian and Haitian people were being horribly discriminated against. There were big outbreaks in Haiti and in New York a lot of Haitian men were positive so they got targeted. Much like COVID with Asian people. And he said "don't get tested. I'm having a hard time keeping my records from people and all they're going to do is tell you that you're going to die and go home and wait to die. There's

no treatment. That's not a real healthy thing to do. So don't get tested. It's not going to help you in any way, it's just going to freak you out."

And then when AZT (Zidovudine) came out, I was hospitalized again. I had a staph infection in my knee joint, I was at work. I went up to see the doctor that took care of employees and she was really great, she turned out to be a great friend. And they admitted and my mom came up from the ICU once I had gotten admitted and, she said "you know, when this is all done, you need to go get an HIV test because there's meds now so there's something that can be done for you. But don't, you can't have it now because you will lose your job. They will try to fire you." And I said "yeah, I know." So I went and got tested at McCafferty after I got out. And back then it took two weeks. You had to wait two weeks. And I knew that I was positive, for me it wasn't a shock. It still was devastating but it was just getting a confirmation. And when I ended up with the person who was giving the results, they had a public health nurse who was great. You know talking all the cheerful stuff that, and I said I want to talk to Randy. Randy was the guy who ran the lab who was my friend. And back then we didn't have HIPPA the way we do now. We were community, we were friends. And I said, I just want to talk Randy, I need to talk to Randy. "Well Randy, you can't talk to Randy he's not here, he's in the hospital." He was in Lakeside which is where that AIDS ward was. And University said "Randy has PML, he's got diagnostic PML." Which meant Randy would be dead within a week or two, tops. I said "Okay, let's save the happy shit for later, okay, I'm just gonna panic and get this out of the way right now. I'm gonna grieve and I'm gonna be totally wiped out and I'll look for the happy shit later." [laughs] "Thank you for offering that up, it's of little use today to me, but I'll figure it out." And Randy died a week later.

At that point I had already lost dozens of friends. And it was kind of a unique situation because I lived around Lakewood most of the time. [wipes the tears from his eyes] I had an apartment right across the border in Cleveland on the West side a couple of times but that whole West 117th and Clifton area of Lakewood in Cleveland was just a gay mecca. In the grocery store half the cashiers were gay, half the people working there. You couldn't go there after work to get food without running into 3, 4 or 5 people you knew. There was a little gay bar which I never went to in the neighborhood but the ice cream stand, every store, the pharmacy everywhere you would go there would be people that you knew. And all of the apartments were full of gay men and lesbians, it was a real community. It was a wonderful community that today is unrecognizable. It just was completely wiped out. And when we finally did get better government funding, the Ryan White Program, which has been re-authorized several times, it's not currently authorized but the original Ryan White Program had Title 1, Title 2 in cities that were heavily impacted by AIDS deaths. It was how we determined which cities should get a greater amount of funding. It was by the numbers, the amount of people who had died of AIDS. Because you could figure X amount of cases, based on how many people had died. And Cleveland was ranked

the same as New York, Miami, and San Francisco. All the big centers of infection. It meant that we had had at least two thousand people die by that time. And probably 90% of those 2000 people were gay men that lived around the 117th and Clifton. 80 or 90 percent of them and it just kept going on for years and years and years. There was always this rivalry between Columbus and Cleveland. They would say "oh you get all this extra money." Well, we have all these extra dead people! It's not extra money, the problem is larger in Cleveland. You don't want this money, trust me, you don't want it. So I slowly became more of an activist.

CW: How soon did people at the hospital, did they know you were HIV positive or you had AIDS?

GK: They assumed as much I think, of every gay man at the time. People would stop eating at restaurants because they knew there was a gay waiter. They didn't want to be served by a gay person, they didn't want a gay cook, they didn't. So pretty early on the AIDS phobia joined the homophobia. When I did get diagnosed, my friend and I decided I should not use my insurance because I would obviously get very sick at some point and have a hospitalization that would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and I would need my insurance. So, AZT was the most expensive drug ever launched and I would buy it out of pocket. He would help me out sometimes and then sometimes I went to Toronto very often. We had friends in Toronto and it's a short drive and there were inexpensive places to stay. So I knew a friend in Toronto who had AIDS who had stopped taking his AZT because he couldn't tolerate it, who would still get his prescriptions filled. So I would smuggle AZT back into the US. Not just for me but for other people. As I got more well known because of my work with Nightsweats & T-Cells and Act Up, I actually was approached by somebody at a shop in Toronto, they had seen me speak at a conference, asking me if I would be willing to smuggle meds into the US for people. And I didn't even hesitate, I said "of course I will." I was so flattered and there just, there was no option. People couldn't get meds, they would die.

CW: How much, I don't know if you know the answer, but how much cheaper was AZT in Canada as opposed to the United States at the time.

GK: It was free. It was free, they never paid for it. That's the difference between us and them. They're civilized. That's why they wouldn't throw it away and they would keep getting their scripts filled if they didn't take it because it was free and it could save somebody's life. It's part of our national shame that continues today.

It's hard because I've worked on a lot of National policies over the years. And you see that the hatred for the LGBT community has not abated at all and the inhumanity of our medical system is, it perpetuates itself. If you look at the

demographics for the newly infected people with HIV in the United States, 70% of them are young gay men of color living in poverty. And if you look at, if you take the epidata from the COVID deaths and you overlay those two demographics and all that epidata, you'll see that they correlate in a frightening way. Because poor people die in pandemics in this country because they are vulnerable and they have, they start out with worse health, they start out in poverty and they start out with less access to medical care. So they are more vulnerable and they die in greater numbers. So when you look at the new infections, it's people who can't access medical care. I think what we're going to see now is what we saw in Southeast Indiana when Mike Pence closed a bunch of the women's clinics, cut the funding off for them. And that was where they did HIV testing. And a lot of opioid users ended up, they had a huge outbreak of AIDS that actually Equitas helped respond to. Before they noticed that there was this big outbreak in new AIDS cases, over 200 people had come down with AIDS in this small community. Mostly straight people that injected drugs. I know all of this stupid stuff because I've been doing activism since, when we first realized how big the problem was. I quietly started in the mid '80's and then by 1990 was pretty vocal and ended up in a very public space. And that has not always been comfortable for me, but it's been necessary.

CW: Let me jump back for a second real quick. You talked about your mom coming to you and giving you advice and support about the AIDS diagnosis. How were your parents? Were they accepting of you being gay? Your mom seems to have been supportive.

GK: My whole family was accepting of me being gay. I have a brother that wasn't but my parents were both mentally ill and they never should have had children. [laughs] My being gay was not an issue for them at all. They couldn't have cared less about that. For my mom I think, if she had any maternal instinct at all, which was very very small, but for her it was a very cruel time because she told me a story once about a couple doctors being at the end of some AIDS patient's bed, making fun of him because he was dying of AIDS. Within earshot of the patient and the nurses. Also when we did finally get a test, the only place in Cleveland that could do the test, because there were a limited amount of machines that could do it, was the Cleveland Clinic. And they had drawn blood from somebody in the ICU, got it to the lab and they needed somebody to drive it down to the Cleveland Clinic.
And my department head said in front of a room full of people " well get the fag to drive it down there because he's probably got AIDS anyway, who cares." And I took the first blood sample from Lakewood Hospital to Cleveland Clinic. I got around the corner from the hospital and just pulled over the van and just kind of sat there shaking. Because I knew whatever was in this blood was already in me. So it was a cruel time in hospitals. I had to, I was seeing a therapist after I was diagnosed and I

had to make very conscious efforts to not be combative when I would see people mistreated. I was asked to go up on a floor to work on somebody's shower in a patient room and plumbing was not my forte. I was second shift and I was supposed to deal with emergencies. And I said 'this is something a plumber should be handling. "Well they won't fix it."
And I said, "well does the nursing staff know, your supervisor?"
"Oh yeah, they know, but they refuse to go and fix it."
And I said, "you have a common shower in the hallway, let the kid use the shower in the hallway."
"Well what about the other patients?"
And I said "well your not having them fuck the other patients in the shower are you? Because that would be really dangerous and probably inappropriate. Like what's wrong with you people?" And these are nurses that I was talking to. These are people that are going to take care of me if I get really sick. It was horrifying, just terrifying.

CW: So you were singled out a lot for that kind of work because they assumed...

GK: Yeah, and I mean I didn't care about that. That didn't bother me. I knew even before I got the diagnosis, I knew I was positive. And I knew by the infections I was getting that being anywhere in the hospital I was exposed to so much stuff. I understand the immune system, I read about it. Everybody that was smart read everything we could and everybody else was more of a danger to me than I was to them. I knew that, but you don't not give people in hospitals care. That's what you're there for. People don't think of maintenance men or housekeepers or, certainly during the pandemic we started to figure that out, during Covid. But it's an intimate part of healthcare that you are as exposed to things as doctors and nurses and you're providing comfort to a patient who's in a bed that's not working or that needs to lower their back and you need to fix the bed. Or the temperature's not right or the water's not working. It's part of healthcare. So I was horrified. My grandfather ran the maintenance department. He was there for 43 years, he was so proud of what he did. And Lakewood was such a good hospital before that. I was proud of working there but I'm not proud of that part of its history at all.
Eventually my friend, the black maintenance man that I worked with, I didn't tell him when I got diagnosed. Because he was an alcoholic, he had substance abuse issues. He clearly was sick himself and I didn't want to share my diagnosis with him. And I was off on a Friday and I got a call that he had come into work and he had been taken up to the Emergency Room and nobody could make sense out of anything he was saying and could I come in and talk to him. Turned out he had PML and I could just see the terror in his eyes because he was trying to talk and he was just babbling incoherently. Not making sentences and he was so frightened. And we were close friends, we had been close friends for years and I just held his hand and told him that

I was positive. And you could see tears welling up in his eyes. He could understand a bit. And I said, " I'm here, I'll take care take care of your bud." And he died three days later and me and my best straight friend in the maintenance department who would cover for me the times when I was sick. Him and I arranged the guy's funeral because he had no immediate family left but he had a life insurance policy through the hospital. We arranged the funeral and his ex-lover showed up in a wheelchair with an IV bag on it. Some of the maintenance guys, other people were there. And the next day they making fun of the people with AIDS before we were going to go up to the funeral. It was right up the street from the hospital. And these were the people that I still had to work with when I came back from the funeral that day.

CW: If Lakewood had such a large gay community, why was the hospital there, was this just all hospitals or was there something in the management or culture?

GK: Why were the Nazi's in Berlin so hateful to the Jews? They had a large Jewish population. It's hate. It's just pure hate. And they felt unleashed because we had a president who said these people are bad. Just by not addressing it and letting Jessie Helms address it from a government standpoint, they unleashed a hatred that was sanctioned by the government. I became really close to Larry Kramer who started Act Up and Gay Men's Health Crisis. And at at one point Larry and I were emailing back and forth about a budget cut in the state of Ohio to the AIDS drug assistance program and he said, "you forgot how much your government hates you." [laughs] That hatred in that hospital was sanctioned by our government and it was allowed. There were not protections for gay people. There are not protections for gay people in the workplace now. Once I came out with my AIDS diagnosis, I waited to come out until we were protected from the ADA, the Americans with Disabilities Act. They could not fire me once I came out, I came out after that. They could fire me for being gay, but they could not fire me for having AIDS. And the doctor when I came out I had to go through a process where I told the doctor who took care of the hospital employees and then I told my supervisor and told my department head. And by this time I had a new department head who was actually a great guy. But the doctor who took care of the patients, she said "you know I've always kept two sets of records. I kept mine and then I kept the ones the hospital had access to. I've believed since '81 that that's what I'd been treating you for. And so I always treated you more aggressively than I would."
But my doctor had died, John Kerry was at University Hospitals and he was 42 years old. He was at a fundraiser for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He was at the deck of the ship, the Mather ship that was docked in the harbor there. They were having a fundraiser and they were roasting lobsters on the dock. You know they were going to bring them up, they weren't doing the cooking on the boat. And he was leaning over

waving at somebody and he slipped and fell and that's about a 5 story drop and he hit his head on the dock and died instantly.

And at the time, this is before the newer HIV drugs , and at the time I think he had 350 of the 700 AIDS patients at University Hospitals. And his partner Russell, had been an anesthesiologist and he had pretty much quit so he could take care of John so that John could take care of all of us. And we used to take care of a lot of people at home. I worked a lot of night shifts taking care of people with AIDS. Starting IV's, TPN (total parenteral nutrition) feeding. I myself would go to work with a line in my arm and then would have to take breaks to do antibiotics, infusions because I didn't have enough sick days left. [pauses to wipe tears from his eyes] But when John died the paper was hounding his partner to try to put them in touch with one of his patients because they wanted a human face to his patients. I had been working with ACT UP as an AIDS activist and I was a person with AIDS and I had been working with Nightsweats & T-cells for years. I was very well known in the community and John and I were good friends so when his partner called me and said would you talk to the press, I didn't tell him that I wasn't out about my HIV diagnosis. I just said, "sure, of course I will." And I talked to the Plain Dealer and then I went over to their house. And I said, "I'm gonna tell you what I told them so that when they write what they want, you'll know what I actually said." And then I went to work and I had the meeting with the supervisor and the doctor because I had to come out to them. And I knew I had to protect myself as quickly as possible.

CW: Who were the groups that were providing this care, this in-home care?

GK: A lot of it stemmed from The Living Room. It was a part of the lesbian, gay community center. Today there is a room that is called The Living Room there, it's a very different experience than it was then. It was mostly gay white men and gay men of color who came together and built out what looked like a living room in part of the community center and we would have support groups there, we would have events, we had you know whatever came up. I was looking for a place to volunteer that was AIDS specific and I had my years of experience on the crisis intervention hotline at the Free Clinic so I started working the hotline at The Living Room one night a week and that made me more friends in the AIDS community. And then we ended up with a team of guys who would go into people's apartments that families had just left to die. Just left a tray of food on a bedside table and just left them to die, put the phone by them. This is before you had the social care network that you have now and we just 'wung' it. We had 5 or 6 of us guys that would go in and then whenever St. Malachi's finally started accepting people into the hospice, people with AIDS. Then there were another 5 or 6 guys that would volunteer at St. Malachi's that would take care of the people with AIDS and through ACT UP we started a needle

exchange in Cleveland and then just your friends would get sick and were dying and what were you going to do?

We had one friend, he was great [laughs]. I met him in group and his name was Mike. And Mike was a very thin man to start with but as he got sicker, he just got thinner and thinner. And Mike finally was so sick, he had so much wrong with him. And he sold his life insurance policy through a viatical settlement company and he was so close to death that they gave him 90% of the face value because he would certainly be dead in 30 days. And he spent the money fixing up his apartment. He was renting an apartment and he put new carpeting in, bought his own appliances. He loved food even though he didn't eat much anymore. And then he just didn't die. But he was going blind from CMV (Cytomegalovirus) retinitis and we would run Ganciclovir. We would run TPN because he couldn't get enough nutrition through his system. He would have other IV's of medicines. And we kept a legal pad up by his bedroom door and you would sign up for a shift and he was never alone. Took a year and a half for him to die. He lived so long that he actually got contacted by the Phil Donahue show. And he went on with the woman who bought his policy and the people from the viatical settlement, from the insurance company. The three of them were on the Phil Donahue together. And I was with Mike up until the night before he died. And he was about as tall as me. He was about 5' 9" and he weighed about 64 pounds when he died. And he was never alone, ever.

CW: So what year did you go on to AZT for your own treatment.

GK: When it became generally available. I think '87, I'm not sure. I think '87 or '86. There had been some clinical trials with it where people were doing 1200 mg a day and waking themselves up in the middle of the night and taking it and everybody got sick from it. When I was diagnosed I got, after you're diagnosed, waiting those weeks, you had to wait for an appointment to get what's called post diagnostic testing. So they would test everything else in your blood. Hepatitis B, C, A, whatever else you might be vulnerable to. And there were no viral loads back then so it would be your T-cell count. My original T cell count was 230 which is borderline full-blown AIDS so at that point, best guesstimates were that I had 9 months to 18 months to live. So it wasn't a question of, you know some people would question, depending on where their health was, should I start on this or not. I had no choice, I had to start on it. And for me it was like a miracle drug. It had horrible side effects but I started at 600 mg and after a couple years I dropped it down to 500 mg a day. Me and John decided that 500 was where it worked best for me. And it was monotherapy, in theory I should have developed a resistance to it within a year and it should have been totally ineffective for me. But I just never developed a resistance to it. I stayed on it until about 5 years ago, 4 years ago. In combination with other drugs, my doctor was the Vice Chair of Infectious Diseases at Cleveland Clinic who I ended up with for 26

years. And she would regularly get asked in grand rounds, why is he still on AZT? Because it works, it just works for him.

CW: It's very odd from all the other people I talk to.

GK: It's statistics [opening his arms wide] You add them all and divide them and this is what normally happens [brings hands close together]. I was out here with that [motions all the way to the right]. I got lucky, dumb luck. And I think my activism also added a lot and my work with Nightsweats & T-cells is pivotal to that. It opened the doors to the world for me in a time when I thought my life was ending. And I was watching so many of my friends die, and lose their jobs and their life shrink. And my life just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger and more exciting and wonderful. And meeting the most amazing people fighting on the front lines of AIDS and I get to work on national policy because of that. And find myself work and create who I am today. I've lectured in probably 35 of the 50 states. I've worked on the last piece of legislation that Clinton signed in the last century to Work Incentives legislation. I've worked on the National HIV Policy, went to Washington to meet with people to help implement that policy. Worked on the Ryan White Planning Council in Cleveland for about 14 or 15 years. Helped start the dental program there that directed over the course of years, millions of dollars to provide dental care for people with AIDS. And it was a fight to get that program started. But Nightsweats & T-cells is what opened all of that for me. It found my voice for me. We were a small group of people with HIV and AIDS who run a commercial screen print shop and try to employ as many people with AIDS as we can. And Paul Monette who was one of the most famous writers with AIDS in the United States was one of our four founders. And I didn't know Paul but I had worked with his words and his creations and mine and my other partner's creations. And then Larry Kramer, I met Larry through his publisher and I became good friends with Larry and I would design things with Larry. And at the end of his life I would design shirts just specifically for Larry. There's a couple of really famous pictures of Larry wearing my shirts in the last few years of his life. And I'm just like, "Wow, I got it right. If I couldn't get it right, he wouldn't wear it!" [laughs]

CW: How was Nightsweats & T-cells started?

GK: The writer Paul Monette and his best friend Victor Brown. Victor used to design greeting cards before he became ill with AIDS. The two of them were on vacation and they met a social worker from University Hospitals. And she shall remain nameless. But she was in the HIV clinic and she became friends with them and they would say things about AIDS and they would say, "Oh that has to be on a shirt because if you wore that shirt to the grocery store then everyone around you could not ignore that part of AIDS." And she came back to Cleveland and was working on a

fundraiser and they needed shirts. She found out there was a screen printer with HIV and she went to him. And then when they were done with that, she said me and my friends were thinking of doing this thing and that's how it got started. And I met him 6 months later and fell in love with him. I went to work with him on a Friday on my day off and was going to help and by that time I had finished with my engineering schooling and I looked around and I'm like, "yeah, I have no idea what you're doing, but I can tell you for free, everything you're doing is wrong. And if I figure out what you're doing I can probably fix it." Just from a systems standpoint their production was just horrible. And he was new to the business. So I fixed it and two years later they gave me half of the company.

And we went to our first outing on a National level was when the quilt was going to be in DC in '92. And we had a bunch of people with HIV who wanted to go but that's not put there for people with AIDS because everybody living with AIDS is living in poverty pretty much. So the idea of spending 3 or 4 days in DC, hotels and travel was impossible. So we, my partner and I, took our personal credit cards and bought a bunch of shirts, printed them all up, borrowed my brother's van and got a street vendor's license. Paid for the hotels on our credit cards. We were on the verge of being homeless and we put up a table outside my brother's van in the legal vending area and it just was one single small table and as soon as we started telling people what we were doing and they saw our designs, we literally could not take money from people fast enough. And then within a day, ACT UP New York came over to where we were on the side street and they just kind of dragged us out onto the National Mall. Which I was very risk averse at the time. I was a very different person than I am today. And I was like, "the Park Police could take all our money, they could take all our product." And my partner was just like, "It's ACT UP New York, come on, let's do it!" And by the end of the two days I was an activist and Nightsweats & T-cells had become an international brand. I was walking back to the car and we had this white shirt with bright fluorescent pink letters. And it just said HIV positive in capital letters and I was wearing it walking around DC, I actually had that shirt on for 2 or 3 days. And some woman stopped and she was like, "I need one of those, can I get that from you?" I said, " We don't have anymore left," we literally had a handful of shirts left, "this is it, I don't have any more left." And she said, well, "I'll buy that one from you." I'm so proud of myself, I sold it for full price. [laughs] And I was never the same, ever. That experience changed my life and found me my voice. And none of the designs on that table were mine at the time. I had just worked with everybody else but then that shifted for me. And by 1993 we went back to DC for the march on Washington and we had started traveling. Because people with AIDS would come up to us all day long like, "Oh my god this is so cool that you're doing this. Are you going to franchise? I'm sick 5 days a week, I'm not sick 7 days a week, I'm literally dying of boredom, I miss working, I miss being around people. Will you franchise? Are you going to open up near me, is there anything like you guys where I'm at?" And then

they'd tell us where they were at. And then finally one guy came up who clearly had some dementia issues and he said there was a group in New York that was trying to do what we were doing. So over the next months I made contact with them and they had actually been started by Larry Kramer's doctor. The woman who Julia Roberts played in the movie "The Normal Heart." And they ran a temp service staffed by people with HIV in New York. So we ended up becoming friends with them. We developed a National Platform pretty much overnight and I just never stayed home after that. I got on the road and started trying to help other communities start projects like ours. And got a handful of them up and running in different parts of the country. Not as long living as Nightsweats & T-cells. We're now the longest running employment project for people with HIV in the country, small but rebuilding after COVID. Our biggest partners are Broadway Cares. Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS are the most amazing people I've ever met in my life. We met them in an hour-long meeting 30 years ago and we still print every shirt they do for every event. And they're still in the same offices, some of the same people still work there. Some of the most ethical people I've ever met in my life, I love them so much.

CW: And how did you meet them?

GK: Actually my partner and I were so poor [laughs] we could afford to do very little so our big treat every week, we'd get the Sunday New York Times and we had aspirations of survival and doing other things in our life. And I saw an advertisement for a job for a merchandise manager for Broadway Cares. I was arrogant and new in the business and I thought well I can do that. I have AIDS, I know how to sell a t-shirt. And I applied for the job and I got a letter from them, you know a nice letter, a month later saying 'We've gone in a different direction but thank you for applying, this and that.' So my partner Michael and I, some flight that I had been on for work had gotten screwed up and back then airlines would give you a free flight and I think he had been with me so we had two round-trip tickets for free and he said Bette Midler was performing in New York. And he said, "we're never gonna live long enough for her to go on tour again, let's just go and let's spend money we don't have." You can't get money from dead people so, sure why not. Let's have a 3-day break. And Michael said, "you really should try and get a meeting with them. They hired somebody new recently, maybe that person isn't wedded to their screen printer and maybe we could have an opportunity there." And I set up the meeting and we met in their little conference room and the meeting took about an hour and we walked out of there hugging each other. And I was trying to get us in stores in New York and that weekend I went to the most famous store on Christopher Street, all full of myself. And it was a store that I had loved and I brought our line of shirts in, approached the manager and he almost physically threw me out of the store. He saw some of our shirts and he just said, "Get that shit out of here, you can sell that shit in my fucking

store!" This very brusque New Yorker. And we get out in the street and I was like "I SO sold that guy." [laughs] And Mike was like "Are you nuts? He almost physically assaulted you." And I said "No dude, trust me, I so sold that guy." And this was like '93 and we had not yet become a known brand and we print on every one of our sleeves, our logo. And the woman who helped start Nightsweats & T-cells wanted this specifically on the sleeves because we wear our heart on our sleeves, we're not going to hide who we are, we're not going to.
So fast forward to '94, we're at the gay games. Stonewall 25, National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference, it's all going on in New York for 10 days. And that store, The Loft, one window was done in Stonewall Memorabilia and the other window, half of the stuff in the window was Nightsweats & T-cells product. I'd gone back to the store a couple times during the year and it turned out, the guy's name was Bob the manager. At the beginning of HIV some artist had lost his partner to AIDS and he designed a shirt and brought it into Bob's shop and said you could sell these and raise money and donate it to take care of people with AIDS. Bob did that and somebody in the Village Voice went after him and just annihilated him publicly about him profiting off of people with AIDS. And I was just like, "Dude, I'm trying to raise money for people with AIDS." And it had left such a, you know it was such a horrible experience for him. Then I show up with the 'HIV POSITIVE' shirt and you know my brand name meant nothing at that point. And then within six months I had shirts in stores from London to Hawaii. This is before the internet. This is word of mouth and just dogged determination not to die. [pauses, overcome with emotion] Not to give up my dreams of having a career.

CW: What do you credit your survival to?

GK: Dumb luck. Met the right people at the right time. I credit my parents somewhat. Being raised in their home was bootcamp for trauma survival. I knew what it was like to live with a killer. And how to try to survive and not have somebody kill you. So I had some survival skills that most people don't have coming into it. Very early on in my life I was a voracious reader and I somehow found the story of Anne Frank and it moved me so much. I had a great uncle who was Jewish and I knew he had a sister who was a survivor. [wipes the tears from his eyes] And I started studying survivor stories and reading survivor stories and I think that imparted some wisdom to me. I don't think everybody that survived, you know survived to write their stories, I don't think it was always dumb luck, I think they also had some skills they had acquired somewhere that, I think I had acquired skills. I was an athlete, I always worked out, I knew that would help my immune system. I knew I was smart medically. The guy that was like my dad, was the most brilliant doctor I have ever met in my life. He trained me to survive, he worked with me. He ended up with Parkenson's and he was bedridden for the last 20 years of his life but his sister was a nurse and I would go to

visit him and he would have medical articles waiting for me to read, to educate myself. Being in ACT UP, huge, huge survival tool. Helping people that I will never meet, that I will never know. Printing all that stuff for Broadway Cares. And they raised money, they send a lot of money all over the country. For food banks for people with HIV. And my one friend who I loved dearly, survived on home delivered meals for years and I knew that staying up late, printing shirts was providing food for people like him. Because each task force in Cleveland would get a grant from Broadway Cares for their food program. I think that was probably the most impactful part of it, activism. I just did my workshop for medical Grand Rounds for Cleveland Clinic, for the infectious disease doctors, Activism and Your Immune System. I think that your immune system works better when you're an activist. I think that we are trained not to. I always start that worksop out by asking "what is the first thing you're taught when you go to school?" Do you remember the first thing you were taught? The first thing you were taught was to sit down and shut up. [pauses, quietly nodding his head] That's not a very healthy way to learn things. Stand up, ask for things, ask questions, find the right answers. It's good for your immune system. When the fight flight system kicks in then when you hear an AIDS joke, when you hear a fag joke, the fight flight response kicks in an releases a lot of chemicals that are meant to gear you up to fight or flee. If you don't fight or flee, if you sit down and shut up, those chemicals become very toxic in your system. If you fight or flee or if you do something positive, it releases more chemicals that actually counteract those, it makes them less toxic to you. So when I walk through a Sears store with my partner and some 14 year old kid, his mom is trying to get him to try on a pair of shoes and he says, "I'm not trying those on, those are gay, those are so gay." I can feel my partner stiffening up next to me. And I just went, "excuse me, excuse me I can help with that because I'm really gay. I don't think it's the shoes. It's for sure me, maybe it's you, but it definitely is not the shoes." That kid looked like he wanted to absolutely fucking die on the spot. But I'll bet you he never said that shit out loud like that again, ever. I wasn't going to take that hatred, because that's what it is. I was not going to accept that hatred in my presence. It's toxic, it's toxic to accept that. And since '92 on the Mall in DC, for the AIDS memorial quilt, I've not accepted that at all. And I never will again.

CW: So you worked with, I think I saw on your website, Lin-Manuel Miranda on a project. That must have been exciting.

GK: It was amazing. It was another one of those kinda things that, you know, the Pulse nightclub shootings happened. This is the thing about Nightsweats & T-cells for me too that's been very chaotic, is because I've been the front person. Because somebody had to be the voice. Somebody had to be the one to say they had AIDS in public for us to thrive as a business and I took that role. And I figured when I died,

somebody else would do it. But it turned out to be a healthy thing. But when the Pulse nightclub shootings happened, I was on a real high because I had done the design work for the Broadway Cares Tony Awards T-shirts. We do them every year. We get the signatures of everybody that's nominated for a Tony award, we put it in a design, go back and forth. They approve it, we print them, we send them, they sell some for a fundraiser, the rest of them they use to put in swag bags for everybody who is nominated. So he got one of those swag bags and it had a Nightsweats & T-cells tag on the back. He made a speech that night, you know "Love is Love is Love is Love." And two days later his people contacted us and asked if we would print shirts for them to help them raise money for the victims' families and the survivors of the Pulse Massacre. And you know we were so wiped out by it. You know there's nothing you can do but be depressed and be horrified and feel threatened yourself. But we got to do something positive. It was one of those things you know, fight-flight. And so for a month it's all I did. It was a seven color front, seven color back. They did not have camera ready artwork. So I literally slept about 3 hours in 2 days. Got the artwork ready and they approved it. We started production and then when people heard he was doing it, people from all over the country were asking them if they would ship some to their communities so they could help them with the fundraising. So we ended up doing about fifteen thousand of them and we shipped them all over. And we had a bunch of people with AIDS in the shop working packaging them and getting them ready and shipping them all over and it was just such a positive thing to do. And then he contacted us and said him and J. Lo were releasing a single together and they were going to do Good Morning America and could we print a tank top for J. Lo with the design. And it's like, well she's never gonna wear that. But I'm printing it for J. Lo, she's for sure not wearing a tank top I printed. But he wore the shirt and very life-affirming. It was amazing and I ended up having dinner with his brother-in-law and sister and they're just really nice people. And we worked on some more design stuff with him, some voting shirts. We met some of the most amazing humans. Bernadette Peters is a regular customer of ours with Broadway Barks and she's been really kind. When her husband died, he died in a helicopter crash, he was a real estate developer. And we sent one of our prints on paper to her and years later she remembered it. We've just had so many people be kind to us, it's amazing. And giving out paychecks is a pretty amazing feeling for people who might be facing the same hatred that I faced at Lakewood Hospital. That is very empowering.

CW: Do you feel that your mission may stay the same but do you feel like your goals or the way you approach Nightsweats & T-cells has changed over the years?

GK: Not mine. My goal is to make as much noise with our design as we can. And make people change, make AIDS stop. If it's making AIDS stop for one person that day that they get their paycheck, that's a part of it. Our friends that were making

decisions between buying AZT or buying food. That's not tolerable, it's inhumane. Even if somebody is on disability but they maybe work one day a month or two days a month, and they are just packing shirts and not making top dollar, that bit of money changes the way they live that month. It may be the only disposable income they've had in a year. So no, it hasn't changed for me at all. I am still working with a lot of the same people, we got a certification through the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce. We just got brought into the Cleveland Clinic supply chain. So I'm inside the hospital now with people saying, "no we don't hate you, we'll pay you to print stuff for us." The challenge is still the same, you know, getting jobs and getting people to work. And keeping the legacy alive because I have so many friends that have died and so many friends who contributed to Nightsweats & T-cells. Larry, Larry died in 2020 and Larry and I worked on a bunch of projects together and during Covid they couldn't have a memorial for him and I had gotten deathly ill with Covid. I couldn't have went anyway, I wouldn't have risked it. But the year after his death at the AIDS memorial in New York City which is where St. Vincent's Hospital had been, some of the people I know, some of the original people from ACT UP New York and Larry's husband, they read different things and spoke about Larry and it was live-cast and I was watching it. And I was still on lockdown and Larry's husband was wearing one of the shirts that Larry and I had designed together and Eric Sawyer from ACT UP said David didn't want to say anything he just asked me if I would read this shirt that Larry Kramer and Gil Kudrin from Nightsweats & T-cells designed together. And he read what was on the shirt and David just thanked everyone for coming. And that was [pauses] I just sat there bawling my eyes out. Watching it by myself, in our shop, I had moved into the shop during lockdown and it was part of my closure with Larry dying not being able to be with my friends around it. I did see my doctor during Covid and she was right on the front lines of Covid like she had been on AIDS. And she said, "You know we've been through this before." And I said, "no we haven't. No, because last time we could hug each other at the funeral. You can't hug each other anymore. We can't even take our masks off, we can't. This is different. This trauma is different."

CW: For you, did Covid have, did it remind you of the '80's at all or '90's during the deaths?

GK: Yeah, a lot. It was dissimilar for me in that I couldn't do anything actively to change things but yeah a lot of loss. I'm dating somebody who's significantly younger than me because most people my age are dead. It's just math. And he knew I was positive, we knew each other before we started dating and the first time we were together he said, "you have AIDS, right?" And I said "yes." And he said, "Did you take all your meds?" and I said, "yep." And he said, "Okay we know what we need to do, we're good." And then when Covid started we were having a conversation and he was like, " I think I need to know some of the stuff because I think I'm going to lose friends." And

I said, “yeah and people from your family and it is going to get bad.” And Susan, my doctor and I communicated all through it and again I had survival tools that most people don’t have and I had resources, human resources. And Susan was like, my gym closed and because of taking my AIDS meds I have degenerative spine disease. I have horrible chronic pain. I can’t be out of the gym, if I’m not working out I’m doing physical therapy. And she said, “your gym is not opening up anytime soon.” And my partner is an athlete and I physically literally cannot survive this, I know that, I know what this pain will do to me. And I had just sold my house and I had moved into the shop and what was our gallery I turned into a small efficiency apartment. And we didn’t have all those pesky event t-shirts clogging up the place so I got online and bought us a home gym. [laughs] And within weeks you couldn’t get gym equipment but we had our gym and we put it together and we spent the lockdown working out. And we both got very early cases of Covid and we both almost died. But I used the survival skills I learned from HIV and built my body back and ended up, because doctors, this is the one thing that I recently lectured on at Cleveland Clinic, was that people will treat people with AIDS, long-term survivors very differently. Doctors approach us very differently today and they are making a lot of obvious and stupid mistakes. Obvious to the people with AIDS, not obvious to them. They look at our T-cells, they look at our viral load. And they say, “oh you have an undetectable viral load and you have 600 T-cells, you’re fine.” And I’m like, “no I’m not fine. I spent from ‘78 till ‘96 without my virus being under control in any significant way. So that virus was doing extreme damage to my body, my organs. We know that for sure.” Then come ‘96, we have never had people on this much medicine for this length of time in the history of humanity. We’ve never done this to humans before. You get cancer, you get cancer chemo, you get better or you die. I’ve been on serious, you know AZT was developed as a chemotherapy and it was shelved. It was deemed too toxic to give to humans and it was taken off the shelf for HIV. This is one of the least toxic drugs I take. We are basically using the same meds today that we were using in 1996. The delivery system has been perfected but they are the same meds, they are destroying our bodies. So during Covid I went from my 165, 170 pound body to 142 pounds. Which back in AIDS days would have been considered wasting syndrome and you would have treated it very aggressively. Probably gotten me on human growth hormones. And I kept talking to the doctors and, well your T-cells are good and your viral load is under control. Yeah that’s not the issue here. I’m eating 5000 calories a day and I’m losing weight, that’s the issue. It’s exhausting eating this much food. And you have to eat a lot of unhealthy calories to get 5000 calories in you. And I ended up developing scoliosis. And we know because of my spine issues, I had extensive MRIs in 2019 and again in 2022 and you can see the rapidly progressing scoliosis in those 3 years. And this only normally happens to adult humans in refugee camps and it’s triggered by malnutrition. And the end result was an apology, “I guess we could have done better.” I’m like, “no ‘we’ could not have done better. I did fine, I knew

what was wrong, I knew how we should have treated it. I didn't have the prescription pad." Back in the day at the Living Room we used to stash drugs. When people would die the first thing you did, you know people would call it 'straightening up the apartment.' And it was a gay person you know you still 'straighten' up the apartment. You get rid of the sex toys, the pornography, whatever. You don't want their families to find that stuff, it's personal. And with somebody with AIDS we used to take their meds and we would stash their meds at the Living Room. We had everything you could imagine. And it was illegal, nobody really gave a shit because I think what the government was doing was illegal. Certainly in the International Court of Law it could be deemed illegal to not treat people. And I would have been able to get those meds. I would have been able to get human growth hormone or whatever we used to treat wasting back then. Because we just went into the store room and somebody said, "yeah you probably need this, here go ahead, do it." And we all knew that what we were doing was illegal and that we were at risk but you didn't even think about it, there were no options. So yeah, Covid triggered a lot of stuff for me. It triggered that we don't have that kind of organization now. We don't have, when I look at gay rights now and I look at what we went through with HIV and AIDS. One of the Docs at Cleveland Clinic asked me about activism in the AIDS community. And I'm like, "there is none. There's virtually none." And somebody asked me if I would be willing to start an ACT UP chapter again in Cleveland in light of the laws that the state of Ohio has been passing when they passed the law that said they don't have to treat gay people. That medical professionals in the state of Ohio do not have to treat gay people. It's the law in Ohio, they don't have to. They could oppose treating maybe because of their religious beliefs and they would not lose their medical license. And somebody asked me about that and I said, "well today if," I said "I actually thought about it." And I don't have Larry to ask which is horrifying but I thought , how do I find enough money to buy enough body armor to put 20 or 30 people out for an AIDS protest or a gay rights protest because today that's the first thing I'd have to think of. How do I find that money? It's different and I think part of it is within the gay community itself. The blame lies within us because the meds came out in 1996. And two weeks after the International AIDS conference I was in Seattle for the National Lesbian and Gay Health conference. And Martin Delany was the closing speaker. Martin ran a project called Project Inform in San Francisco and it was the best treatment newsletter in the world. It was better than any medical publication on the market and Martin was so smart that he ended up on the HIV approval board for the FDA. You could not get a drug approved that Martin hadn't had a say in it. He was just a genius and Martin said, "Now comes the hard part. Now comes the hard work. These drugs are way more expensive than anything we've seen before. They're not the answer and people are going to think it's over and they're going to go home and they're tired and they're going to want this to be over. And you can't blame them but this is going to be harder than ever. And I've seen activism erode from then. I would go to events as

Nightsweats & T-cells and we would not be selling as many AIDS t-shirts as we would gay t-shirts and some of the fun design stuff that we do. And I understand it, people are tired, I was tired. But I also understood that it posed a danger to us too. And the only voice that we had were people like HRC having their big Galas and you know only the rich people can afford to go to. You don't see them fighting for young gay men of color who are being infected with HIV at astounding rates and dying of AIDS at astounding rates still. Because they get diagnosed later and sicker and the meds don't work as good. Those people in their gowns and tuxedos are not going to come fight on the front lines. That's never going to happen.

CW: Where do you see the fight going now?

GK: Sadly, I think that, again Larry, boy I would love to talk to him. Knowing what I know from history, knowing what I know from the history of AIDS, and knowing what I see people doing today, remember that people didn't really fight for people with AIDS until there were hundreds of thousands of dead bodies. I see people talking about gun violence and why nothing gets done in schools and stuff, there's not enough dead bodies yet. People just don't care, there's just not enough dead bodies. That's what I saw happen in AIDS. It wasn't until we were swimming in dead bodies that people were finally like, Jesus we've got to do something I guess I can die from this. We have people now in these mass shootings, people are surviving their second mass shooting or getting killed in the second mass shooting that they've been involved in. And I just don't see gay people doing anything much at all about AIDS or about gay rights until there's a lot more dead bodies. They just cut in the budget, the House of Representatives proposed to cut all the funding for ending new HIV infections by 2030. They cut all the funding for it. In Sydney, Australia they are ending AIDS as a health crisis. Sydney is a huge gay mecca for travel but they treat everybody who is HIV positive, they get Prep into everybody who is at risk and they are having almost no new infections. Just like New Zealand got to zero Covid infections at some points because they are doing the right thing. We are doing everything wrong and people are not paying attention. I don't know how you get people to pay attention other than what Larry did and scream and yell. Call them idiots, call them murderers. You know at one point we were throwing people's ashes over the White House fence because you had to. But it wasn't until enough people had ashes in their front rooms and so many of them and from so many of their friends then they were like, 'what do we do with this, we've got to do something, we've got to make this stop.' And I have hope, I have you know, but couple this with the environmental crisis, I think the chaos and the tragedy that's unfolding in front of us is incomprehensible to us. The policy geeks that I'm close to, we talk back and forth. Not just people working in the gay field or the AIDS field and we're gaming out with some of them what this looks like with closing all these women's clinics where the easy access to HIV testing is

throughout the south where you see these high impacted areas with new HIV infections and I just, I don't see where this ends other than in tragedy. And huge escalations again in new HIV infections and deaths. And it's almost incalculable because you can't comprehend that this is still going on all these decades later when we know exactly what to do. When I went to DC to help with the implementation of the national HIV policy, I read the policy, I was the point person for Health and Human Services (HHS) for their, the guy who was in charge of HIV policy for Health and Human Services was a friend of mine and he was looking for somebody to be the point person in Cleveland and I said I would. And we put together a really good Town Hall meeting, we had it streamed to 5 other locations so people could see it. And then they invited me to come to Washington and I'm reading the policy and reading the policy. At the time the State of Ohio kicked 300 people off of the AIDS drug assistance program in one day. Everybody got letters, those 300 people, 'We're dropping the requirements from 500% above poverty to 300% above poverty as of today you will no longer get meds from us.' 300 people, not 90 days, not 180 days, just figure it out or die. And in the meantime the National HIV Policy is test test test test test. Nowhere in that policy was anything about funding all the meds we would need for all the people we were going to test that would then turn out positive and we had 8800 people on waiting lists for HIV meds in the United States at that time from different AIDS drug assistance programs. And the assistant deputy secretary of HHS was there and we had time where each of us had input. And so I'm reading through this policy and it was just test test test, no money. So I had just convinced somebody to get tested in Cleveland at Gay Pride and then the State of Ohio cuts the meds. And I'm like "you can get on the meds, if you test positive, you can live." And I'm like how do you get people to go out and test people when you're not going to offer them treatment? How do you live with yourself when, you know this is more reprehensible than Tuskegee, if you look at somebody who's newly tested in the state of Ohio and they come back HIV positive and they make over the limit of what they're allowed to earn. In the State of Ohio we have the most archaic HIV criminalization laws. So we're going to tell somebody that we're going to test them, tell them they are HIV positive, tell them that they are not sick enough yet because they can still work they have an income, so we are not going to give you the meds and you can't afford them, your company doesn't give you insurance. And keep in mind this is before the ACA (Affordable Care Act) when I was saying this. And I said so you'll tell them you'll watch them 'till they get sick enough and they don't have enough money and then you'll give them the meds. This is possibly more reprehensible than Tuskegee. Because you're also telling this person that if you have sex with someone and you don't tell them you're HIV positive you can also go to jail for attempted murder. Although we could give you the meds to get your viral load down to undetectable then you couldn't infect anybody. But the people in Tuskegee, you told them nothing, you just watched them. You didn't give them the treatment

but you didn't criminalize their sexual behavior. In basic public health 101, who do you treat? Do you treat everyone with a sore on their dick or do you only treat people with the most sores on their dick? I just said that to the deputy secretary of HHS. He sat there stunned, then he got tears in his eyes. I said, "I don't know how you can live with yourself, I can't on my watch. This is inhumane, it's incomprehensible that you would think this is acceptable to anybody. This is more inhumane than Tuskegee yet it goes on today. And the gay community, because it's poor men of color mostly and long term survivors who tend to be somewhat invisible, are just inactive, it's just not an issue. To me it's an issue everyday when I have to take my meds. It's an issue when I cut my hand on a window a few weeks ago and my boyfriend was there and I had to tell the paramedics when they came that I was positive and the lady said, "Well it doesn't matter to me." And I said, "Well it does to me because I don't want to go to prison so I have to tell you I'm HIV positive." And my boyfriend had to watch this. And he knew that they had the right to refuse treating me if they chose to. And he was so traumatized and I can't protect him from that because there aren't enough people willing to protect him from that.

I'm so happy I survived, everyday. I lost so many friends and so many of them were so much smarter than me and had way more to offer the world than I do. And I managed to survive somehow and I'm so happy about it everyday. And I lived long enough to find somebody that really loves me and it's nice. I plan on being around for a long time now.

END 1:52:41