DAN ROYLES: Okay, so it's Friday, April 13, we're at the Center for the Humanities at Temple. This is Dan Royles doing an interview for the African American AIDS Activism Oral History Project. If you could just start out with your name, date of birth, place of birth?

DAVID FAIR: My name is David Fair, I was born on April 27, 1952, in Philadelphia.

DAN ROYLES: And so did you grow up in Philadelphia?

DAVID FAIR: Born and bred in Southwest Philadelphia.

DAN ROYLES: In what neighborhood?

DAVID FAIR: In Southwest Philadelphia.

DAN ROYLES: What part of—?

DAVID FAIR: I guess you would call the neighborhood the Kingsessing area—

DAN ROYLES: Okay.

DAVID FAIR: —of the city. That's what they call it today. When we were growing up it was just Southwest Philadelphia.

DAN ROYLES: What was the neighborhood like, growing up?

DAVID FAIR: When I was growing up, it was predominantly an Irish and Italian Catholic neighborhood. I lived a block away from the elementary school, the Catholic elementary school, which at that time had the largest number of students of any parochial school in the country, so there was a high concentration of predominantly working people who worked in factories in deeper South Philadelphia and Southwest Philadelphia.

DAN ROYLES: Did your parents work in the neighborhood, in the factories?

DAVID FAIR: My father worked at the Atlantic Refining Company, which was in Southwest Philadelphia, as well as at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, which is in South Philly. My mother was a homemaker; she had eight kids.

DAN ROYLES: Oh wow.

DAVID FAIR: So she stayed home with all of them and tortured herself for decades.

DAN ROYLES: And then you went to the University of Pennsylvania.

DAVID FAIR: Yeah, I got a scholarship to Penn, actually. They have something called the Mayor's Scholarship in Philadelphia, which was primarily a politically awarded scholarship, if you met the academic requirements. I actually only went to Penn because I couldn't afford to go to La Salle, which was the Catholic college that I was supposed to go to, but they didn't give me a scholarship so it was cheaper to go to Penn. It cost me eleven hundred dollars a semester for room and board and tuition back in those days.

DAN ROYLES: And you majored in political science there.

DAVID FAIR: Yes.

DAN ROYLES: Growing up in the sixties and early seventies, it was obviously a politically charged time in American history. Were you aware of that growing up?

DAVID FAIR: Yeah, I think my parents were fairly progressive politically, which stood out in the neighborhood, which was a predominantly—everybody was a Democrat, you had to be a Democrat to do anything, but my father was actually a Republican. But both of my parents

were reasonably progressive on issues related to race and eventually on the war and other issues, so they taught that to me to some extent. I remember when I was eleven years old, staying home to watch Martin Luther King and the March on Washington, which was something that (laughs) none of my friends were doing. They were sort of ignorant of the whole Civil Rights Movement. But it really wasn't until I was in high school that I got to sort of develop my own sort of political consciousness, and started getting involved in mostly anti-war activities, but there were always other fringe activities going along with the anti-war movement, and one of those was the expansion of the University of Pennsylvania into West Philadelphia. When I was growing up, I was at Fifty-Seventh and Kingsessing Avenue in Southwest Philadelphia, and it was at least three miles away before you had any experience of being on the Penn campus or near the Penn campus. But during my high school years the university started to creep closer and closer, and I still remember the feeling of walking out on my front step and being able to see one of these new tall buildings that they had built from the front step of my house. And there was a lot of uproar in the community around sort of like there is attempting to be around Temple today, with people being upset about being dislocated because of the university. So I got involved in some of the protests that were going on. Mostly I was active in the effort to build the University City Science Center, which still is on the stretch of Market Street from Thirty-Fourth Street to Fortieth Street, which had been mostly older homes that had been converted into apartments. And so a lot of Penn graduates or students who were just attracted to the campus, young people, rather, who were just attracted to the campus were living in that stretch of area, and there were a number of fairly significant demonstrations against the expansion, and I can proudly say in 1969 I was participating in one of those

demonstrations, and it was the first time I was arrested for some political activity. And it was a hopeless cause, within five years that section of West Philadelphia had basically disappeared.

DAN ROYLES: And you were in high school at this point.

DAVID FAIR: I was in high school, and was involved in a lot of anti-war activities at the time too, so when I went to Penn, I naturally sort of gravitated towards that segment of the student population.

DAN ROYLES: What segment of the student population was that? You mean, the politically active segment?

DAVID FAIR: The hippies and the druggies and the people who were more rejecting of the sort of mainstream culture of the university. At that point the perception was, I don't know if it was actually true, but the perception was that the majority of the students at Penn were Jewish kids from New York and California and from out of Miami and other places, and I was always assumed to be one of them, because my name is David and some people think I don't have a Philadelphia accent. But there was a sort of, I don't know what you would call it, sort of a mainstream culture at the university. Penn, while it did have a tradition of student activism, was not in any way as radical as you saw up in New York or at Berkeley and those kinds of places. So the extreme lefty types like myself were always sort of on the outs within the campus, and we created our own little subculture that I joined immediately upon arriving there.

DAN ROYLES: Did that include gay liberation?

DAVID FAIR: Not while I was an active student, no. It did include the Black Student Union and some other sort of minority type organizations that were trying to express themselves, but it really wasn't until after I had graduated that the openly gay activity started to happen. I mean, I'm sure there was stuff going on. I was, at the time not really aware that I was gay, so I met first wife there, my only wife there, and got married while I was a student at Penn. But by 1976 it was clear, I had realized that I was gay and got a job on the campus working for St. Mary's Church, which was a campus ministry, and it was through the church actually that I got involved in LGBT activism. There was a Gays at Penn chapter, it was a tiny little group that met secretly in this organization called the Christian Association. It was interesting, the whole gay rights thing at Penn started out of Christian activism, sort of different than a lot of other places. But there was a very progressive Christian community on the Penn campus. And so I got involved in Gays at Penn, and as I was no longer a student, but I was very actively involved in campus activities and pretended to be a student when necessary, when we were advocating for something on the campus. But out of Gays at Penn came a few other organizations, most of which don't exist anymore, but one of which I think still continues as part of the Walt Whitman—not Walt Whitman, the William Way Center. Gay Peer Counseling, it's called. My office at the church was not actually at the church, it was at this building called the Christian Association, which was where most of the gay focused activity was occurring, and Gay Peer Counseling was the office right next to me. So in addition to being involved in Gays at Penn, I got to meet a lot of gay people who were coming in for the peer counseling, because the peer counseling was not really just or even predominantly for Penn students. It was during a time when a lot of people were struggling with coming out, more so than they do today, and Gay Peer Counseling was pretty much the

only place you could go to talk about that kind of stuff, and where there were support groups and things of that nature in the city. What grew out of Gays at Penn, in addition to Gay Peer Counseling, was an organization called what later became the Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force, which I was a co-founder of, and what I think is probably the first gay cultural, openly gay or openly cultural (laughs) activity in Philadelphia around the LGBT community, called the Gay Cultural Festival back in 1978 and 1979. That was the activity that got me—I basically ran that festival and we brought in speakers and comedians and performers and plays and dance performances, showed what few gay films that were out at the time, and that's what really got me to be more connected or more involved in the larger gay community in the city. And so by the time that I left St. Mary's, which was in 1980, I took a job as the assistant to the president of the hospital worker's union in Philadelphia, I was fairly well-connected in terms of gay activism generally, and so when I became an officer in the union I used that position there to try to advance LGBT issues as well as AIDS issues.

DAN ROYLES: When you were part of the founding of the Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force, what was your political focus, or what was the political focus of the organization?

DAVID FAIR: Well I think we founded it really with a fairly simple, what we thought was a fairly simple agenda. One was to get a gay rights bill passed in Philadelphia. Part of that strategy included getting non-discrimination policies adopted at Temple and Penn, which we thought would be important victories to sort of build some momentum towards getting elected officials to be more supportive of a potential gay rights bill. I worked closely with a

guy named Scott Wilds. We both were very active in Democratic Party politics. I had been since 1970, when I first came to the Penn campus I got involved with the Twenty-Seventh Ward, which had just been formed as sort of a campus ward within the Democratic Party structure. And so we had a focus, even though it really wasn't the Task Force's primary purpose, we had a focus on electing gay people as committee people in neighborhoods so that we could start having some direct access to where the real political influence was in Philadelphia, which at that time, as it is today, was in the Democratic Party. There was more of a political machine than there is today. So the idea of demonstrating that there was actually a gay vote that could be identified in some way that was credible to the ward leaders and to the party chieftains was a high priority for us because we figured that if we were ever going to get legislation passed, there needed to be not only an argument that it was the right thing to do, but there needed to be a perception that there could be a political penalty if people didn't support the gay rights bill. And to me it was a surprise how successful we were in electing committee people. Partly it was because nobody wants to be a committee person, so it was like you often could run unopposed, but also it was a more political time. People were more likely to get involved with this kind of thing anyway, but I guess you could say we represented the part of the gay movement that was less about partying and less about demonstrating, even though we did our fair share of that. It was more about trying to get access to the levers of power and try to exercise power the way it is exercised in Philadelphia, which is by networks and who you know. And we were pretty successful in electing committee people in Center City and in University City, and also in Northwest Philadelphia, in Mount Airy and Germantown area, where at that time it was predominantly lesbian community. But there were also a lot more people of color involved

in the party up in the northwest areas of the city, so for me it was the first real experience I had with the fact that not everybody who was gay fit the profile of the typical white gay man in Center City, which I didn't feel I fit either. So I tended to gravitate toward the people who were sort of less popular downtown, even though that's where all the money was, and that's where most of the influence was being exerted. So anyway, in addition to trying to get the gay rights bill passed, which we eventually did in 1983, another agenda for the Task Force, which was really less my agenda than it was the agenda of a guy by the name of Walter Lear, who had been at that time the only openly gay public official that was well-known, at least in Pennsylvania. He had been a Deputy Secretary of Health in Harrisburg and was a health care activist in various ways, and he had an agenda around organizing around gay health issues. And in those days everything was male, we really weren't thinking about women. Even though there were a lot of women involved, it was primarily a gay male agenda and that was true in the gay health area as well. And he convened a meeting in the summer of 1980 of a committee of the Task Force that he wanted to form to focus on health issues, and the primary issue besides the spread of sexually transmitted diseases generally, that we wanted to focus on was hepatitis B. There was an epidemic of hepatitis B among gay men and his idea was that if we formed a health committee that we might actually be able to raise some money for the Task Force because a pharmaceutical company, Merck Sharp & Dohme, had discovered a vaccine to combat hepatitis B, but they needed the plasma of gay men who had, or people who had hepatitis B to be able to develop the early versions of the vaccine, so we thought they might give us some money to collect plasma among gay men. And so we established in, also in 1980, the health committee became a separate non-profit organization called Lavender Health, and we started to do

some public education stuff, primarily around hepatitis B. In the end we couldn't get any money from Merck Sharp & Dohme (laughs) but by the time we gave up on that, we were all hearing the rumors of what was, what we thought was a New York problem, which was later known to be the AIDS epidemic. So Lavender Health formed a task force within itself called the AIDS Task Force, or it was called something else at the time, I think it was called the Health Emergency Task Force or something like that, because we weren't calling it AIDS then. But the AIDS Task Force ultimately took over Lavender Health, and Lavender Health changed its name to Philadelphia Community Health Alternatives, and that's really where the AIDS activism in Philadelphia started.

DAN ROYLES: Do you remember at what point you first became aware of what was going to be the AIDS epidemic? Obviously—

DAVID FAIR: Right.

DAN ROYLES: —it was not called that. Do you remember when you became aware of this "New York problem"?

DAVID FAIR: Personally I think that it was around the time that Lavender Health was starting, which was either late 1980 or early 1981. Since in my head we knew how hepatitis B was spread, there was an assumption in Philadelphia among the doctors that we were working with, John Turner and Nick Ifft and a couple of other people, they all made the assumption that AIDS was something to do with hepatitis B. And so I like to think we knew earlier than other people how this was being spread, or at least we were vaguely conscious of it, so that we could talk to people about being more careful about their sexual activities,

and maybe about being a little bit less promiscuous, which was, you know, nobody was thinking about condoms at the time. But so I remember a couple of sort of community meetings where we were talking to people about what was going on in New York. We didn't have any sense that anybody had been sick in Philadelphia. I was in a unique position being at the hospital worker's union, which was a predominantly, overwhelmingly African American union, low-income workers working in hospitals and nursing homes in Philadelphia. It was in early 1981 that we had an uproar among some of our union members at Hahnemann Hospital who were—at the time I wasn't making the connection to AIDS, but there were women being admitted into the hospital who had this wasting disease, and they were dying very rapidly, and nobody could diagnose what the problem was. And the members of the union were nervous about taking care of them because nobody knew what the problem was. And so they wanted us to negotiate with the hospital to not have them have to take care of them, that there should be some specialized unit for them. Later on we realized that these were some of the early victims of AIDS that weren't being recognized by anybody, and probably wouldn't have been for several years, I think, except for the fact that people like myself were in a position to sort of cross the two cultures: the culture of the gay predominantly white community that was getting more and more concerned about this, and the healthcare system, where there were places where we represented union members were the hospitals where low income people generally went, where Medicaid was the primary insurance. And so I always remembered those few women who were members who were complaining about having to care for, because it gave me a different perspective on how the epidemic grew, and it's one of the reasons I got involved in African American AIDS activism, because I think early on I was treating the

epidemic less as something that was just affecting the white gay community and more as something that was affecting people who were at risk in the various ways of their behavior, and by 1983 it became pretty clear that injection drug use and prostitution and other things were associated with the spread of HIV. And so it was pretty clear by then that this was not just a gay white male epidemic, and because I was living my life, my professional and personal life, primarily in the African American community, that sort of got me more exercised on issues of just basic fairness of how we describe the epidemic, and when we advocated for resources, where the resources needed to be invested. And I had some credibility for a while to do that, because even though I wasn't really a founder of the AIDS Task Force, I was a founder of Lavender Health, where AIDS Task Force came out of, so I was perceived of as somebody who was a respected member of the white gay community. And so when I started talking about these other people being affected by AIDS, it created some negativity toward me in the white gay community, that only reinforced my efforts and helped me to find other allies who recognized that it was our job really, I considered it my job as a white gay man, to make sure that while the white gay community was obviously being heavily impacted by this epidemic, that it was my job to make sure that what I thought of as the inherent racism of how the gay community had developed didn't impact on how the epidemic was handled. Because that was a little bit more dangerous than having black people carded in the bars because we didn't want black people dancing on our dance floors.

DAN ROYLES: Is that what you mean by "inherent racism"?

DAVID FAIR: Well no, I mean, I think there's an inherent racism in the fact that people tend to seek sexual partners from among people who are like them, generally, and that the gay community, despite all the other arguments we were making for how we were organizing and where we were finding common ground. In the end the one common ground we had was that we shared a sexual identity, a sexual preference, and so it was natural that there would be a white gay community and that there was a black gay community that was sort of separate and dealt with, handled, created its own culture that wasn't part of the gay movement in that as, since it was the late sixties, early seventies that the modern gay movement started, and there was all this other activism around the war and around women's liberation and other things, it was sort of a natural thing that gay liberation would develop among the white gay community, I think. And so in some ways I think of it as a benign kind of racism. It was just not being antagonistic to the interests or needs of black gay people or Latino gay people, but rather just being ignorant of them, and feeling like there was a legitimacy to having a separate community that was organized around white gay men. That there was something legitimate about that, and I could argue that position that there was a natural affinity among white gay men, and it was in the white gay community as opposed to in the lesbian community or in the people of color communities, that the political issues of being gay were mostly being addressed. I mean, that was our issue, and it wasn't so much the issue of the closeted black gay man in Germantown. You know, structures got built to reinforce our community that weren't getting built for other communities, and there were a lot of racists in the white gay community, just like there is anywhere, and there was antagonism to including other people, but mostly it was just ignorance and this feeling of separation. It's sort of like a—I used to think of the—I actually

still do think of the white gay community downtown as like a Southern town, where it's like there's just this culture that's built up over the decades and it's not that they're antagonistic, it's just that they are not concerned about people who are unlike them. And it was clear that the ways that the white gay community organized itself were not going to be the ways that black gay people were interested in organizing themselves, or even the lesbian community was organizing itself, of all colors. You know, that each community had its own cultural norms, and to the extent that they felt the need to organize, were going to organize in their own ways. And the structures that we built in the white gay world were not going to be as friendly to them. I think the issue, how that impacted on me, since I liked to think of myself as being involved in a lot of the initial construction of some of the institutions in the gay community, like the gay community center and the gay pride marches, and all of that kind of stuff, I was very involved in those things, any of the gay political movements, that—what was I going to say? Oh, that that structure that we were building, the increasing power that we were getting for ourselves, and visibility, and respectability, if you want to call it that, became part of my agenda to make sure that that power was not used, when it came to the AIDS epidemic, solely to advocate for resources for the white gay community. And that those who were organizing, like the AIDS Task Force, and eventually founded ActionAIDS and some of the other organizations that are around today, in my view really thought of the AIDS epidemic in terms of white gay culture, and I believed that would make them ineffective at combating the epidemic and helping people with AIDS in other communities. And I felt a responsibility as one who had helped to build those structures where we were starting to exercise some influence and power, that it was my responsibility to make sure that those tools were used to the benefit of a larger

population than just the white gay community. And I was in a position to do that, I think, because I was an officer of the hospital worker's union, and the hospital worker's union from 1979, even before I joined it, had proclaimed that it was going to elect a black mayor in 1983, and was a very influential union politically. And so I got to be part of an African American political movement that no other gay people, openly gay people, let alone white gay people. And that allowed me to develop relationships with African American politicians, allowed me to get very close to Wilson Goode, who was eventually the candidate that the community gathered around to be the candidate who was going to be elected as the first black mayor. And so I had an outsized influence that really wasn't based on the perceived financial influence or power of the white gay community downtown, or the fact that we had these committee people scattered all over the city. It wasn't just that. I had access to that, I got to claim that as part a base that I could represent, but I also got to claim a base in the African American community that was really the union's base because by 1983 I really had a sense of the epidemic as really being something quite different than just what the media was talking about. It gave me tools to use to advocate in different ways.

DAN ROYLES: What about PCHA and the AIDS Task Force's prevention and education efforts? Did you see them as being inadequate to reach not only people of color communities in general, but the gay men within those communities?

DAVID FAIR: Well, I've said they were totally inadequate in reaching anybody outside of the Center City white gay world. I mean, the only real prevention efforts were done through the bars and through the gay bathhouses, and they were pretty effective, I think. We had a spot at the bathhouses so people could get condoms, and they could get tested when the HIV test

was eventually offered. But it was all about sex, and it was easy to talk in a sexual context among other gay people. It was harder to talk in a sexual context about anything, let alone a fatal disease, outside of the white gay community. And I'll say, in defense of PCHA, it wasn't pretending to be all inclusive. It was making the argument, it's the white gay community where this epidemic is taking its biggest toll, and therefore that's where the resources should be spent, and that's where the work should be done. And there wasn't much in the way of resources, you know, PCHA survived on the contributions of white gay people and the friends of white gay people. There was no government funding to speak of up until like 1986, '87 except for HIV testing. And it became a point of contention that the HIV testing, all of the HIV testing that PCHA was doing was happening downtown, that that was as a result never going to reach some of the other communities. It was perfectly acceptable public health strategy because that's where you could find people to be tested and that's where the positives were, the positives that were going to be more easily found.

DAN ROYLES: At the same time that PCHA and the AIDS Task Force were developing, was the Lesbian and Gay Task Force doing anything around the epidemic?

DAVID FAIR: Not really. I mean, Rita Adessa, who eventually became the director of the [Lesbian and Gay] Task Force early on decided she wasn't going to get into AIDS because what she saw, and what I saw, and what a lot of people saw, who were around from the early days, was that AIDS was taking over the gay movement and that there was less energy around—getting the gay rights bill passed was sort of the last spasm of what I would call a purely gay movement in Philadelphia. I think it was 1983 when AIDS started to get called AIDS. Don't hold me to all the dates, it's amazing how long ago all this was.

DAN ROYLES: That's about right.

DAVID FAIR: And we didn't have very many gay people in Philadelphia. I mean, gay people, we didn't have many people with AIDS that we were aware of in Philadelphia. We all knew somebody who was sick, but it was like, it was a big deal when you knew somebody who was sick, because they were rare. At that time, the idea of having AIDS but not being symptomatic was not something anybody was really paying much attention to. But Rita decided that, and we debated this at the time, that what was a gay rights agenda, and an LGBT respect agenda, was going to be minimized because of all of the energy that people like myself were putting into AIDS, and that somebody needed to hold the fort. And there was always going to be a community, especially among women, that was not as impacted by AIDS, and that they had the same concerns they had before AIDS came about, and that somebody needed to be advocating for them, and she held that together pretty well for quite a few years.

DAN ROYLES: So it was a decision you agreed with.

DAVID FAIR: I think, looking back, at the time I don't think I agreed with it. I don't remember feeling strongly about it, but because Rita was very close to me in those days, and she was resenting the fact that I was getting involved in other things besides the Task Force, because I had been very, very involved in the Task Force. And so looking back I think that for many years the Task Force was pretty much the only thing going on around traditional sort of gay liberation agendas, and you know, I don't think it succeeded in preventing the takeover of the AIDS world of gay consciousness in Philadelphia, the gay male consciousness, at least, in Philadelphia. But I think they made a vigorous effort to do

so. And we suffer today by the failure of the Task Force ultimately to maintain that, that AIDS is no longer what preoccupies the community, but neither does anything else.

DAN ROYLES: Going through the rest of the, say, 1980s, what was your relationship with the Task Force like?

DAVID FAIR: Well it deteriorated pretty rapidly after, around 1985, early 1985, when there was an acceptable level of disagreement around whether or not the [AIDS] Task Force had a responsibility outside of the Center City white gay community, where we could argue about those things without feeling like, you know, we couldn't have dinner together. And I remained active in the Task Force partly because I had always been active, but also because my partner at the time was a very active volunteer, and he was African American, and so in some ways he gave me credibility to talk about that issue. There was also another organization that I was a member of at the time called Black and White Men Together, which was slowly but surely getting itself involved in the debate around race in the white gay community. It was originally, I guess it was originally intended to do that, but it was just like every other gay organization, it started because people wanted to meet each other. And I was also very active in BWMT and had resources at the union to make available to BWMT that gave me a certain influence in the organization. I had a union hall so we could have events and meetings there. I had a mimeograph machine and a copying machine, so that made me a resource to almost every gay organization in Philadelphia. Because one of my roles was to be the media spokesperson for the union, and for the union president, who at that time was a fairly visible political figure, I also had influence in terms of getting media coverage for gay events and things like that. So, I forget how I got into all of that

now—but oh, the Task Force. I think within its limitations, its sort of cultural limitations, the Task Force attempted to be more sensitive to minority issues, but in typical fashion, in what I think of as benign racist organizations, they really didn't think in terms of giving people power, they thought in terms of having people represented. So my partner, his name was Leon, he got to be the chair of a committee around diversity at the Task Force, and later on people like Rashidah Hassan and Tyrone Smith became members of the board of the Task Force. Looking back, I can respect more the efforts that they were making. It was all totally unacceptable, as far as I was concerned, because having people in the room talking about the fact that this epidemic was affecting communities of color didn't really mean the resources were being focused on that. And when it came to what little money there was, the decision always was to spend that on public education materials that were clearly oriented towards gay white men, and the gay bars, and gay networks, and that we knew those were not the networks where black gay men were, and certainly not where straight people who were getting HIV were. And at the time, those publications I was telling you about that I gave to Kevin [Trimell Jones], almost every week there was something in the paper about me or somebody else complaining about the Task Force and how it was being insensitive, and wasn't doing a real job in the minority community, and little by little we were able to spread that word through the *Philadelphia Tribune* and on WDAS, and various other black community networks, so we could get more attention in the black community as well. I think that there was, it was in 1985. I'm trying to remember the years, I think it was 19—it must have been 1985 or late 1984 that something else had happened. This organization called the Eromin Center had been formed probably in 1979, 1980, right around the time Lavender Health was being formed, and it was formed by a group of

mental health counselors, gay mental health counselors, lesbian and gay mental health counselors, to provide counseling services to other lesbian and gay people. And they were very successful, and they were probably the second organization, the first being the Gay Cultural Festival, that got government funding in the gay community in the history of Philadelphia. They got certified to accept medical assistance payments, which was a big deal because there's a lot of poor gay people who didn't have health insurance other than medical assistance, and the whole business model for the Eromin Center was that people would pay for the counseling. And for its first few years of operation it was a small little center on Rodman Street, and eventually became a pretty, for the time, significantly sized non-profit, but started to attract a more low-income and minority population of clients because it had been certified for medical assistance. And so more gay people who were struggling with their sexual identity in minority communities started showing up at the Eromin Center, and younger ones, and that was a culture shock for the people who had started the Eromin Center. Because they been thinking, there's going to be other white lesbian and gay people like them that are going to be coming in for counseling, and they're going to pay us our fifty bucks an hour, and they weren't really thinking about insurance, and they weren't thinking about the larger community. And one of the projects of Eromin Center was a program called Eromin House, which was for kids in foster care who were openly gay. And Eromin House turned out to be really badly managed, it just really wasn't well done by Eromin House, and there were all sorts of stories about the kids prostituting while they were there, and volunteers from the community going in and having sex with the guys in the Eromin House, and all that kind of stuff. I have no idea whether any of that was true, but it became a real controversy and the therapists—and this is my biased

perspective on how this happened—but the therapists who had founded the Eromin Center decided that this was nothing like what they had intended to get into. All the controversy around the Eromin House, the fact that there were all these black people and poor people coming in for counseling, that wasn't what they wanted to do. So they controlled the board of directors, they were all white gay men, I think there were two women. Except for the two women, they were all, the rest of them were white gay men, and they just decided to close the Eromin Center, to close it up, because it was not doing what they expected it to do. And I was livid about that, because it was one thing if they didn't want to continue to do it, but they didn't have to kill the non-profit in order to do that, and there was a controversy around the closing of the Eromin Center. Mark Segal, who was the publisher of the *Gay News*, supported the closing of the Eromin Center, and even though I didn't have a mouthpiece like he did through the *Gay News*, there was another paper called *Au Courant* that was published weekly, and they were friends of mine. So they tended to, whenever I pontificated on something, they would write about it. And so I was getting an award at the annual dinner of the Black and White Men Together group, and was asked to give a speech, and so I gave a speech where I used the Eromin Center controversy as a way to articulate, in my view, the fundamental racism of the white gay community, and that without two things happening—people of color organizing themselves in whatever way they needed to organize themselves, and white gay people who were involved in the white gay community being responsible enough to speak out against the racism of the white gay community—that we were destined to fail. Interestingly enough, most of that speech didn't have to do with AIDS. There were some references to the AIDS stuff, and even though I did attack the AIDS Task Force for being sort of similar to the board of the Eromin Center in that they

were capable of similarly destroying services for communities of color, it didn't affect my relationships with people on the Task Force board. It was like, at the time I remember being very angry and frustrated, but looking back I realize that they were incredibly tolerant of the barrage of criticism that I and other people were organizing against them. Not to save them. So there was a point in time, in 1986 I guess it was, when Rashidah and Tyrone Smith and Leon were all active members of the Task Force, and I was harassing them for giving credibility to the Task Force, and it was really in 1986 that there started to be some real organizing being done by people of color, among people of color, around AIDS. And that was the beginning of a period when it was no longer so much me trying to fan the flames. I mean, there were other things that had happened. The mayor, Mayor Goode, had formed something called the Mayor's Commission on Health Emergencies in early 1985, which I was very involved in, and in which we got to state that the epidemic was not just a white gay epidemic, and to emphasize the minority aspects of the epidemic. So there were other things that were going on, but the community itself started to organize itself, and it was less about me and more about ways that I could be supportive of the work that other people in the LGBT community, mostly LGBT community, who were African American, Latino, the work that they wanted to do. And they were feeling more empowered to do so, and the other thing that started to happen around that time is that there started to be more federal money to be spent on the epidemic, and so that focused people to go after the money. And I think the Task Force by that point had been so battered by all of the criticism, we had won some space somehow in the conversation about AIDS so that whenever there was these resources available, there was the belief that it had to be distributed a little bit more intelligently, and a little bit less focused just toward the white gay community.

DAN ROYLES: What about your ongoing relationship with the Lesbian and Gay Task Force?

DAVID FAIR: Well, I had sort of separated from that, so I wasn't really very active in that. I didn't feel a negative relationship with them, but there wasn't an affirmative one either. It was, they just sort of existed over here somewhere. The issues that the Task Force were focusing on, if I remember correctly, were mostly then about media stereotypes, so what they were doing was important work, but it wasn't work that moved me particularly. But I still had friends who were active in the Task Force, and people who were on the board who consulted me from time to time, but the Lesbian and Gay Task Force was pretty much a non-player by 1986 as far as I was concerned. The AIDS Task Force had since—Lavender Health had long since changed its name to PCHA, and that was the task force that mattered, as far as I was concerned, that those were the people who were sitting in the position to have a stranglehold on resources coming into the community. And since influence in the gay community at that point was being defined by influence over AIDS politics, that's where I focused most of my efforts. I have to blow my nose if you don't mind.

DAN ROYLES: Sure.

DAVID FAIR: (blows nose) Excuse me. So I guess it was late 1985 that Rashidah had started BEBASHI, and I don't honestly remember how we got connected.

DAN ROYLES: You to Rashidah.

DAVID FAIR: To Rashidah, yeah. But previously there had been an organization that was formed as part of the AIDS Task Force called IMPACT, that Tyrone had been responsible for. And I was very active in supporting them as an advisor and giving them space to meet

at the union hall, and that kind of stuff. And they came to me whenever they needed to write something up, if they wanted to put out a press announcement or they wanted to do a PSA on the radio, or whatever. I was frustrated because I didn't want the Task Force to have its own little pet (laughs) minority organization. But that's what Tyrone wanted, so I was supportive of that. But that really wasn't going anywhere. Tyrone was a wonderful person but he wasn't a community organizer, so it was mostly his network that he had been part of for years that was mobilizing around HIV education. Rashidah was a nurse at Einstein Medical Center and again I can't remember how we even met each other, but somehow it came to my attention that there was this organization that had been formed that was basically a figment of the imagination of this woman that, and this other guy's name was Wes Anderson, and that they wanted to be a real organization. They didn't see themselves as a task force of the Task Force, but rather as a separate organization, and that they needed some help. And we connected however we connected because at that point Mayor Goode had been in office for a couple of years. There used to be something called, what was it called, it's now called the Activities Fund. I forget what it was called then, but it was basically a slush fund where city council people got to give money to favored community groups. And we went to the mayor and asked if he would find some money to help start BEBASHI. And so BEBASHI had not yet even gotten its non-profit status, so the money actually came to the union, and we found them a little office space, and we raised eleven thousand dollars to help BEBASHI get started, and that's when the union hall really became the center for black gay activism, I think, black AIDS activism and gay activism in Philadelphia, for quite a few years until I left there in 1988.

DAN ROYLES: And that's something that you were able to do because of your connections to city government.

DAVID FAIR: Yes, yes.

DAN ROYLES: At that point you were on the Commission on Health Emergencies, were you still on the Mayor's Commission on Sexual Minorities?

DAVID FAIR: I actually was never on the Mayor's Commission on Sexual Minorities. I had been charged by him to form the Mayor's Commission on Sexual Minorities but I never actually served on it. The first round of appointments and stuff, basically, I was like the power broker who got to pick the people who were on the commission. I forgot all about the commission. I should read my own résumé. I should have thought to read it before I sent it to you so I could remember some of these things.

DAN ROYLES: Did you get any pushback from the union?

DAVID FAIR: No, surprisingly not. I think Nicholas, Henry Nicholas, who was president of the union, was very progressive politically. I think he was not in the slightest bit of denial about the fact that there were a lot of gay people in the black community. I was very careful not to use the relationships in ways that would get in the way of the union's agenda, and I did spend, you know, eighty hours a week working on the union's agenda, so a lot of it was stuff he probably wasn't totally conscious of, that was going on. Except for when Mark Segal or a guy named Jeff Britton who ran an organization called the Walk Whitman Democratic Club, he was like our competition in electing committee people and being involved in the party. He once complained to the union about me using the union's name to advance my

political agenda in the gay community, and Nicholas to his benefit said I was an officer in the union and I could do whatever I wanted. So there wasn't any pushback there, but I like to believe it was my relationships within the African American community, with gay political figures, with church members—we were very active in the African American church as a union—with community organizers and neighborhood people in the black community, that I was a credible person to them. I was seen as somebody who was—it wasn't that they thought I was one of them, but they didn't think I was one of the other side either. And I was very conscious of being, in religious terms, maybe, a missionary or a messenger. I knew about what was going in AIDS because of the unique perspective I had, because of where I was, and the white gay community had plenty of people spreading the message about AIDS and how to not get AIDS and what to do for people with AIDS. The black community didn't have that, and I figured it was my job to spread that message, it was my job to convey that story because it wasn't going to be told otherwise until it was too late. And, you know, I remember being invited to speak. I was often invited to speak from the pulpit at black churches around whatever the union's issues were at that time, and eventually I put AIDS on the agenda for those kinds of things. And I remember getting through to a lot of people by basically standing up and saying, you know, I'm a white man and I'm a gay man, and I'm not even really much of a Christian, so there's no particular reason for me to be standing up in this pulpit to talk to you about a sexually transmitted epidemic, except that I know it's happening, and I know it's happening in your community, and you're not doing anything about it, and you need to do something about it. And people responded, people responded to the direct confrontation because it made sense. It really did make sense to people. And I think the other thing that I was willing to do that people

like Rita Adessa from the Task Force were not willing to do, and the white gay community around AIDS was not willing to do, was to not require people to meet some kind of pro-gay litmus test before you could get them active on AIDS. Then you could be a preacher who still thought this person was a terrible sinner, but that didn't mean that they didn't still have the responsibility to care for them as members of their congregation, if they had AIDS or if they were at risk of AIDS. And that message got through to people, at least to some level, to some scale. And I think that I'm associated with black gay AIDS activism largely because I saw myself as a white person with a message rather than as an organizer who was trying to save this other community and wanted to be a hero to them. I had a message to share that I was uniquely positioned to share and I had to take advantage of that opportunity.

DAN ROYLES: What was the Goode administration's relationship with a, the white gay community and b, the black gay community like?

DAVID FAIR: It was generally a very positive relationship on both sides. I think the influence that I had over Wilson Goode, or with Wilson Goode, distorted the white gay community's relationship with him because by 1986 I was persona non grata among white gay activists. Not necessarily on an individual, personal level, but in terms of the political work, and Mark Segal from the *Gay News* decided he hated my guts because I had criticized him over the Eromin Center debacle. I like to think I was being mature enough to not try to stand in the way of anybody else's expressions of interest, and the Goode administration was very conscious of the fact that they got a lot of white votes out of the white gay community, and that they needed to protect that base, because he was going to be running

for re-election. And so Wilson basically treated people, I mean he was pretty open to everybody, so it wasn't just the fact that he had been sort of taught to be more sensitive to the gay community, but relationships were generally positive. I think he felt a little trapped by the argument I was making about the racism of the white gay community, and made sure to not get himself personally involved in that. The Mayor's Commission was more involved in that stuff and that was his commission, so they could speak with his voice in a way that today's committee, whatever it is that Mayor Nutter has, doesn't have the same clout. But and since they were all people that I had appointed, they tended to be a lot more progressive on racial issues and their co-chairs were a black gay man and a white lesbian, which automatically made it unimportant in the white male gay community, because there weren't any white gay men who were running it. But in any case, I think I had a personal relationship with Wilson that nobody else had, and I used that to full advantage during that period.

DAN ROYLES: You mentioned BWMT. At one point you split from BWMT, is that right?

DAVID FAIR: No.

DAN ROYLES: No?

DAVID FAIR: No, I mean, if that perception is there, it's probably because after I gave that speech there were a lot of people that were upset with me, in both the black community and the white community because it was divisive, and it was like, you weren't supposed to be being divisive. But I don't remember feeling split from BWMT.

DAN ROYLES: I thought I had seen a speech in the Scott Wilds Papers where you basically said that you were withdrawing from the organization.

DAVID FAIR: No, I think we're talking about the same speech, though. What I was advocating for was a more active, and more of an advocacy agenda for BWMT. I stayed involved with BWMT for many years. But I think of it as the Eromin Center speech, because that's really where the ramifications were that I had been critical of the white gay community for destroying the Eromin Center. It was a formal speech, I mean it was a fancy dinner, there were like six hundred people there. And it was probably the first real speech I had ever given in my life, a political kind of speech. But in terms of BWMT as an organization, a couple of years later I spoke at their national convention, and a very similar message, so I don't think I ever split with BWMT.

DAN ROYLES: Did that organization, BWMT, take any kind of specific approach to AIDS as part of their agenda?

DAVID FAIR: They did, in fact probably the very first rap song about AIDS was developed by BWMT Philadelphia, it was called "Respect Yourself." They even published it in an album that was played on local radio for a while. And they were, as far as I was concerned, they were more conservative around raising the issues. It's like, they would support public forums on the issue of race and AIDS, but because it really was a coalition of white men and black men, and my bias was that most of the black men who were part of BWMT were black men who were sort of not oriented towards their own community, their own ethnic community, that they wanted to be part of the white gay community. And that was definitely the case with Leon, who was my partner at the time. And that arrogantly gave

them less credibility in my own head because they could be like the Uncle Toms for the white gay community, and in some ways BWMT was that way. And what you probably picked up from that speech was me saying it shouldn't be that way, it should assert a black agenda or a black pride agenda in the gay community, that that was necessary for there to be an organized black gay community, that someone needed to be a bridge between the two communities, and BWMT was the place for that to happen. And—so I forget your question, so— (laughs and coughs)

DAN ROYLES: It's fine.

DAVID FAIR: Hey, I'm going to be sixty years old in a couple of weeks. I have a right to have a bad memory about some things.

DAN ROYLES: Totally fine. Aside from maybe having a black pride agenda, what would an effective black gay community organizing effort have looked like programmatically?

DAVID FAIR: I mean, it's hard to say because I think especially then, and probably even still today, the vast majority of African American gay people don't really identify with an agenda about being gay. It's just not as important to them. I think it's probably less important to white gay people today as well. But those days when you could at least make a stronger argument that gay people were being actively discriminated against, that agenda was just not going to appeal to most of the African American people that I came into contact with, and I was working full time for an organization that was dedicated to organizing African American people. So in my head it wasn't really up to me to decide what they needed to organize around, and if it hadn't been for AIDS, I'm not sure I would have gotten as

exercised around this issue, but it felt to me that they did need to organize, because the epidemic was going to wipe them out if they didn't organize, and it's still wiping them out today. There's still a very high preponderance of HIV infection turning into full-blown AIDS in the black community that doesn't occur in the white gay community anymore, because people are just not connected into the predominantly white gay AIDS systems that we have today. So I didn't have myself, in my own head, a political strategy around how the black gay community should organize as a black gay community. I did have an idea about how the black gay community should organize around AIDS, because we had proven that when you have an agenda that was based on preventing the spread of HIV, you could have an impact. We had proved that in the white gay community. And the same strategies could work because they were basically based on organizing a community of people who were mobilized around sex, sexual behavior. There was a thriving black gay subculture in Philadelphia. There remains one today that's sort of invisible to the downtown world, and that's the world we needed to get the message in, just like when we were doing hepatitis B plasma collecting, we went to the bathhouses, because that's where you were going to find gay people with hepatitis B. The parties and the little corner clubs and all the various networks that exist in the black gay community needed to be the networks that we used to get the word out about HIV as well. And the message needed to not come from people like me. It's one thing for me to stand in front of a black church and make them feel guilty, but then I would leave because there was nothing else for me to do except spread that message. They had to sort of take up the cudgel themselves to do something. People like Tyrone Smith really got involved in AIDS activism because he could see it wiping out his network. That's what motivated him, it wasn't any political understanding of this epidemic as

confronting us because nobody cares about gay people and nobody cares about black gay people in particular. He wasn't motivated by that, he was motivated by, I want to do something to stop people from getting sick, and to help the ones who are sick, and I need resources to do that with, and why are people getting all the resources and I don't get any? So he was like a natural organizer for a network of a particular component of the black gay subculture in Philadelphia. Michael Hinson was another one. I don't know if you have talked to him, but he's another one who's definitely worth talking to. He tended to interact more with the middle-class black gay men, people who were more on the down low, and people who were closeted. There were a number of black gay people who were very active in their churches, who sort of everybody knew were gay, but they just didn't make an issue about being gay. And they were very nervous about bringing up HIV issues, because they would be expected to, within their culture of the church, but they could lose their belongingness to those communities if they were overtly telling people about being gay. These were all the kinds of people in the gay community that I thought needed to somehow be energized around the AIDS epidemic, and that by organizing around the AIDS epidemic, we would both energize a community of gay people that were not energized by the typical white gay efforts, and we would be able to do it because we had resources for doing AIDS education. And it didn't take much of an argument to convince people that from almost day one, the epidemic in Philadelphia has been a biracial epidemic. It didn't spread to the black community after it spread to the white gay community anywhere, but the perception was in New York and in Miami and in Los Angeles and in Chicago that it was like the secondary epidemic was in the minority community. In Philadelphia, because we had talked about it earlier, we had started talking about it in 1980, 1981, it was a conversation that recognized

that the epidemic was growing in both communities at about the same pace, and I envisioned a black gay AIDS movement more than a black gay rights movement. And I think that developed. It had its starts and stops, and some successes and a lot of defeats, but I think that by the time that the AIDS Activities [Coordinating] Office was established, then there was a significant amount of city funding available, and I had fortunately positioned myself to be the person making decisions on where that money was going. And by the time the federal money started to flow, there was at least a framework of organizing going on among mostly black gay people, but also in the black community generally, around AIDS, to start investing the resources and building some infrastructure that could compete for resources to something of the same scale that the white gay community was able to compete for, at least for public resources, for government resources.

DAN ROYLES: Where was the geographical center of the black gay community? Did it have a geographical center?

DAVID FAIR: (sighs) I don't know that—there wasn't anything like the Gayborhood, if that's what you mean. I think that the black gay community was where the black community was, in Northwest Philadelphia, North Philadelphia, and then in Southwest Philadelphia. I think there was a strong contingent who lived in South Philadelphia on the west side of Broad Street. For some reason I remember you could have meetings down there because there were so many people who lived in that neighborhood, and you could have meetings in Germantown because there were lots of people who lived in that neighborhood. But to the extent that there were centers for the community, they tended to be the bars, and in addition to the Center City bars, there were two Center City bars, there was a bar called the

Swan Club up in Olney near the Broad and Olney train station that was a major gathering spot, and there was another bar, I think it was called the Owl's Nest, in West Philadelphia around Forty-Sixth and Market.

DAN ROYLES: What were the two Center City bars?

DAVID FAIR: One was called The Smart Place, that was on Arch Street. There were actually three of them. Smart Place and The Allegro, they were dance bars, and then there was a basic bar for serious drunks called Pentony's at Thirteenth and Arch, which was, I think that was a straight bar that just had a lot of gay people at it. The other two were—they were all owned by the mob, just like most of the white gay bars were at the time.

DAN ROYLES: When you were involved with the AIDS Activities Coordinating Office, that was during the late 1980s, early 1990s.

DAVID FAIR: Right.

DAN ROYLES: How did the infusion of money from Ryan White, say, or other federal funding packages change the local picture of the Philadelphia AIDS political scene?

DAVID FAIR: One of the differences in how things played out in Philadelphia compared to other cities was that it really wasn't the federal money that changed the situation, it was city money. When Wilson Goode asked me to start the AIDS office, there had been an AIDS Control Unit that everyone was complaining about, and on behalf of the union I had given extremely critical testimony about the city's lack of response to AIDS in the summer of 1987. And after giving that speech, you know, it attracted attention for a couple of reasons. Partly it was because I was really getting on the nerves of John Street, who was a

councilperson at the time, so he made it a personal agenda to attack me for attacking the city, and attacking the Goode administration, even though I was theoretically an ally of the Goode administration. And Wilson Goode was never offended by the attacks I was making on his administration, because he knew it was never about him personally, and he always tolerated some egregious behavior on my part. But after this particularly vicious attack that had gotten a lot of publicity, and had gotten a lot of action around it because ACT UP in Philadelphia started around the same time, the summer of 1987, and an organization called We the People Living with AIDS started at the same time. So for the first time, really, we started having protests and things like that around AIDS, and they weren't inwardly focused. We had had protests against the Task Force, but we had never had a protest against the city government and its response to AIDS. That was left to ACT UP and We the People to do that kind of stuff. So anyway, after I gave that speech, Wilson basically came to me and said, did I think I knew better how to create a response to AIDS in Philadelphia, and I arrogantly said yes. But I said, "You can't do that without money, you have to have some money." And I later learned, everybody later learned, that the mayor was not very good at managing the city budget, because the city almost went bankrupt in his second term. (laughs) So but it turns out I was taking advantage of that because he said, "I'll give you a budget," and he said, "You have to come up with what you think is a reasonable budget for an AIDS response in Philadelphia." So in November of [1987] I became the first director of the AIDS Activities Coordinating Office, and that was the fiscal year that had ended in the fiscal year of 1988, so he had promised me money in the fiscal 1989 budget, and I had seven months to prepare to spend the money. So that's what we started to do. I saw myself as representing the organized AIDS community from all perspectives. By that point there

was an established BEBASHI, there was an established Programa Esfuerzo at Congreso, which was the sort of Latino folks, and we had browbeat people so much, really, that the racial issues were always front and center. So it was like, we didn't have to fight as much for attention, as we had before. People just took for granted, we have to deal with the race issue whenever we do anything. And there was an informal group called the AIDS Advocacy Coalition that had formed to try to influence AIDS policy. There was a lot of resentment among AIDS activists that I took the job as the director of the AIDS office, because it was obviously a personal connection. If they had had their druthers, somebody else would have gotten the job. But I had the job, and at least for a while, people were supportive of me in that role. And so we basically put our heads to the, whatever the term is, put our axes to the grind or whatever, and figured out what could we reasonably expect to build if we had to do it by July of 1988. And so we created on paper an expanded HIV testing system that was going to have more HIV testing sites in the community, as opposed to just downtown, we created more AIDS housing programs, which had been an issue also that I had been very actively involved in, because the union was very involved in homeless work. And so in 1986 there had been hurricane in Philadelphia, Hurricane Gloria, and there had been one death on the street of a homeless person, and it turned out to be a person who had AIDS, because none of the emergency shelters would take him in. A drag queen, who was homeless, who had died literally because they wouldn't take him into the shelter when the hurricane hit. And so I had been making a stink about those issues, so AIDS housing was a big issue for the first round of AIDS funding, and AIDS case management, ActionAIDS, had formed by that time. ActionAIDS had formed really out of a split between the doctors at the AIDS Task Force, the doctors at PCHA and the social workers. The social workers left PCHA and

formed ActionAIDS because they realized that, in fact, there weren't any treatments for AIDS and that what we really needed was a system to take care of people who had AIDS, as well as to prevent the spread. But their real focus was people who had AIDS and how to take care of them, so AIDS case management was a big area. We created personal care homes for people with AIDS, home care nursing for people with AIDS. What I had the advantage to do that no other AIDS director in the country had at the time was local dollars with no strings attached to do whatever I wanted. And not just what I wanted, obviously, but whatever the community wanted. And Wilson Goode and the Health Commissioner at the time, Maurice Clifford, were very supportive of everything that we wanted to do, even though you could have argued at the time, we should not spend money on home care services for people with AIDS because if people were poor enough that they didn't have insurance to have home care services, they could get their home care services through medical assistance. But our argument was the "AIDS exceptionalism" argument, they call it. We didn't believe the mainstream systems were going to be able to care for people with AIDS, and we needed to create a separate system that would care for these people. And so it was really the infusion of that city money in 1988 and 1989, it was about six million dollars, we actually came up with a seven million dollar proposal to the mayor and he came up with six million dollars to support it. And in 1988 and 1989, those two fiscal years, we had enough money to do everything that we could think of to do. And what we did was ignore medical services because we figured there weren't any treatments for AIDS anyway. The only thing people could do at the time was AZT, and we were all pretty clear that was just killing them, they were just living a little bit longer before they died, but eventually AZT would kill them. I like to believe, in my self-serving version of history, that because I was

responsible for directing this money, and because in most cases we didn't run a process where we said, we have two million dollars for AIDS case management, people should apply for this money. It was me deciding, I want to BEBASHI this money, I want to give ActionAIDS some of this money, I want to give Congreso some of this money, I want to give some of this money to support the organizing of IMPACT. And there was another organization, Adodi Philadelphia, that we gave money to at the time. And I got into some trouble for this, but we were giving money to organizations that were organizing an AIDS movement in the black gay community, even though it was really using AIDS to organize a black gay movement. You know, people complained about that, but I could make the argument that I just described to you earlier: we have to have people in those communities spreading this word about AIDS. And I like to think that we institutionalized a structure that could have created an AIDS response unlike any other targeted towards lower income people and towards people of color. I think that it did a reasonable job. I don't think it did anything like the job that I was hoping it would do, but it did a good job. And even today, the basic structure of the AIDS community, the AIDS organizations, the AIDS service industry, is structured pretty much the same way we structured it at that time. Ryan White didn't actually get passed until 1991. I was gone from the AIDS office by that time and was the director of We the People with AIDS. And We the People had started off as predominantly white gay men as well, but because they had a drop-in center, what they discovered was they attracted a lot of street people, a lot of homeless people, and they were generally people of color. And they had another, one of the many sort of internal fights that happened in a lot of organizations, when there was this culture shock, this culture clash between black gay people and white gay people. And basically, the white gay people walked

away from it, just like they did at the Eromin Center, leaving it to be a predominantly black organization, and they hired me to run the organization. And that was in many ways like the dream job for me, because I got to be working for people who had HIV, and speaking on their behalf, I was their paid spokesperson. So it was no longer David Fair's agenda, it was the agenda of a predominantly gay and predominantly black group of people who actually had AIDS, who could advocate for resources in various ways. And because I had funded the system in the first place, I had been the director of the AIDS office, I had an outsize influence over how the Ryan White money got spent and over the AIDS consortium, which was formed to distribute the money. This supposedly objective body, which really was like a group of mafia dons getting together and dividing up the resources.

DAN ROYLES: So you came to We the People after that.

DAVID FAIR: After my stint at the AIDS office.

DAN ROYLES: But after that split in the organization.

DAVID FAIR: Yes, yes. Yes, my roommate at the time, he wasn't my partner, but my roommate at the time was a guy by the name of Arnold Jackson, who had worked there, he had done something, I forget what his job was. But he didn't want to be the director, but they wanted him to be the director, and I was looking for a job. And they thought of it as a real coup at the time because I had my fingers on all the levers of power, theoretically. And then there were years of controversy after that, fighting over every penny from Ryan White that came into the city. It was less of a gay thing, We the People was really the one black gay organization. The COLOURS organization was formed originally by We the People, until it

was able to split off on its own, so there was a black gay organization that could compete for money on its own, but pretty much they were the only black gay organization that made any serious effort to get AIDS funding. We the People was ostensibly not a gay organization, BEBASHI was non-gay, was sort of the not gay version of the AIDS effort in Philadelphia, and there was an organization that's still around called One Day at a Time, which was an organization that did drug and alcohol treatment, drug and alcohol recovery work, and they were predominantly not gay people, but they had a lot of AIDS, people with AIDS in their operation. And so that was when the, if you want to call it matured, the effort around black AIDS activism matured into something beyond the gay AIDS activism, because One Day at a Time was an important player in North Philadelphia, and important player politically, and an important player in the drug and alcohol system. And Rashidah was an important player in her own right, and BEBASHI was the immediate beneficiary of pretty much every dollar that came into the city because they got the black money. It was really that overt. It's like, you have to divide the white money between ActionAIDS and PCHA and the Family Planning Council, and PHMC, and some of the other organizations, and you give the black money to BEBASHI and COLOURS and We the People, and you give the Latino money to Congreso and APM. That's the way those decisions were made at the time.

DAN ROYLES: So what kind of work did We the People do day to day?

DAVID FAIR: Well the strategy behind We the People, which eventually became a conscious strategy, was that it would provide direct services that poor people with HIV needed. That was everything from serving lunch every day and having dinners two or three times a week to providing a place just to be, to take a shower. It really was a drop-in center in the holistic

sense. Pretty much anything that you needed, you could get at We the People. We had people come in from other organizations who could do case management work and HIV testing and medical care for people who wanted that, but mostly it was a place to hang out. There were lots of support groups, lots of education and also fun type of activities, everything from yoga to movie nights and those kinds of things. It really became a community center and because there had been this transition from predominantly white gay men to predominantly black gay men, and a lot of homeless people, and there were a lot of hustlers, a lot of black gay hustlers, and drag queens that were attracted to We the People. I shouldn't say "drag queens," it's probably more (mic interference) I don't know, you're not supposed to say that at all anymore, I guess. Transgender people. But people who were forced out because of their effeminacy, who would come to We the People because it was a safe place to be and you could be who you were there, and it wasn't a bar. You couldn't do drugs there and you couldn't drink there. You could just hang out. And eventually we got to have a membership list of almost five thousand people. And five thousand people who were partaking in some way or another of some service that We the People—half of that was food, just the fact that we had food to give out. But it was really neat. And we went after money for those kinds of direct services. We wanted money for our food programs. We didn't want money for case management. We wanted money to be able to give emergency financial assistance to people so they didn't lose their apartments, those kinds of things. And because pretty much everybody except me was an African American person with AIDS, whether they were gay or not, and they were the visible people, they were the people who were, in terms of the community itself, they were the people who were out there doing the work. But we also paid people to talk about AIDS, to go and do

speaking engagements. It was called the "Positive Voices Program." And there's a program that's now at Philadelphia FIGHT called TEACH which grew out of We the People as well, Project TEACH, which trains people with HIV as consumers to speak about HIV. And that was a very popular thing to do during the early nineties, midnineties. Everybody was looking for somebody to talk about AIDS to their youth group or to their church group or to their school group. The Knights of Columbus, everybody wanted somebody to talk about AIDS, and we had the resources at We the People and paid them, we were able to pay them to go out and do this work. And we also cornered the market on HIV education among people with HIV, which was not as important to the system as it is today, that the best way to stop the epidemic is to stop people with HIV from infecting other people. And that meant getting them off of drugs, and getting them stable housing, and getting them into mental health treatment if they needed it, getting them medical care once the medical care started to improve. I think in many ways it was that being at We the People taught me what real community organizing was. It was almost organic in the black gay community, and it's been desperately missed since We the People closed. There's no organic space for black gay people to come together anymore. Not even a bar.

DAN ROYLES: Were you the executive director when We the People shut down?

DAVID FAIR: No, I left in 1996 and I think it shut down in '98.

DAN ROYLES: Because of lack of funding?

DAVID FAIR: There's a lot of reasons. There's actually a guy who wrote his thesis about We the People and about how it developed, which I could get you a copy of because

unfortunately I don't particularly like the way I'm portrayed in it. But what happened was that without the force of my personality and without the fact that I really did see myself as the chief organizer—there's a guy named Saul Alinsky who's written books about community organizing going back to the fifties and sixties, and I was like an Alinsky-style organizer, and when I left they couldn't find a new person so they hired a triumvirate of people to run We the People and—

pause in recording

DAVID FAIR: —the last twenty minutes?

DAN ROYLES: No, just the last probably ten seconds.

DAVID FAIR: Oh, okay. Of course I forget totally what we were talking about already.

DAN ROYLES: We the People.

DAVID FAIR: Oh, We the People, that's right.

DAN ROYLES: And Alinsky-style organizing.

DAVID FAIR: Yeah, I think I was there as an organizer more so than as an executive director. They replaced me with people who were more so there as executive directors. We had a very democratic operation. The board was elected by those five thousand members and the truth of the matter was I was good at manipulating people, I was a good organizer. And when I left they didn't know how to manage the population in the same way, and probably nobody could have done it the same way. And people just started to divide from each other and fight over the money. Nobody questioned the decisions I made about where

money should go, and they trusted me because I was an outsider. You know, it's like in many ways I was trusted because I was white and because at least I had convinced people that I really was trying to act in their best interest even though I was a white person. And my successors weren't able to accomplish that level of credibility. And I think also the culture of AIDS activism started to change because treatments started to improve. Protease inhibitors were popular at the time, people were imagining AIDS being a chronic disease. The ActionAIDSes of the world and the PCHAs of the world were reasserting themselves around the need for case management and arguing against the medical agenda around AIDS, and We the People tended to find itself more on the side of the medical agenda around AIDS because they were people with AIDS, they wanted the treatments. Kiyoshi Kuromiya who was one of the founders of We the People, one of the early supporters of We the People, was still very active in We the People, and he was a nationally known—an internationally known advocate around AIDS medications. So the other thing that happened was that the Consortium collapsed upon itself, because it really was corrupt, and was replaced by something called the HIV Commission, which was less corrupt. And We the People had no insider in the HIV Commission, like they had me as an insider in everything when I was there. But when the Consortium died and the HIV Commission was formed, interestingly enough I was asked by the Rendell administration to make that happen, so I did a lot of the early work to form the HIV Commission, even though I was one of the corrupt people in the AIDS Consortium. But it created a different atmosphere so that in some ways it became more even more corrupt in the sense that people who were more articulate and people who came from bigger institutions tended to have more influence over the HIV Commission. We were much more democratic and community-focused in the

Consortium. We the People just didn't change with the times, and there was some problem with the money, there was some mismanagement of the money. What eventually killed We the People was that its last director—was he the last director? The next to last director became the new head of the AIDS Activities Coordinating Office, and for whatever reason he wanted to overdo it in proving that he was not going to be beholden to We the People. So some of the games that we used to be able to play to get money and to get status, he wasn't playing those games. He was, at least by his lights, he was being more objective in not giving We the People any special access. We had always argued when I was there that We the People deserved special access to everything because it was people with HIV, and nobody else could represent people with HIV the way We the People did. Even though he had been the director of We the People, he didn't buy that when he was the director of the AIDS office.

DAN ROYLES: What was his name?

DAVID FAIR: Joe Cronauer.

DAN ROYLES: Where was the center for We the People?

DAVID FAIR: It was at 425 South Broad Street, Broad and Lombard Street. The other thing that was probably going on was something of the dynamics of the neighborhood, because the Avenue of the Arts was being built, and the landlord wanted to get We the People out so that he could sell the building, he thought, for millions of dollars. And the Rendell administration had cleaned out a lot of the homeless people in Center City. There had been this whole sort of tent city of homeless people on the Broad Street Concourse in South

Philadelphia that was there for years, and we drew a lot of members from the concourse. And there was an abandoned hospital down the street, Broad Street Hospital at Broad and Fitzwater that a lot of homeless people lived in, and we drew a lot of people from there as well. And so the city boarded up the hospital and cleared out the concourse, and so on some level I think there was just fewer people coming into the services of We the People.

DAN ROYLES: As ACT UP formed in the late eighties and got going in Philadelphia, did you have an particular relationship with them?

DAVID FAIR: Me personally, or We the People?

DAN ROYLES: In any—

BOTH: In any capacities.

DAVID FAIR: Well I can probably say that I produced the first ACT UP leaflet in Philadelphia. David Chickadell, who was a member of ACT UP as well as We the People came to my office on a Saturday morning at the union and asked me to make photocopies. I think that 90 percent of my effectiveness as an organizer was that I had mimeograph machines with electronic stencils and copying machines. I easily ripped off tens of thousands of dollars of resources of the union while I was there. ACT UP was primarily organizing around medical issues. Kiyoshi Kuromiya was our real link to ACT UP. They tended to be younger white people at ACT UP, and again, white people with AIDS who had left We the People. There was no real antagonism there, but there wasn't a lot of interaction for a long time. Over time, as some of the white gay activists died or moved on, white gay AIDS activists at ACT UP left, more and more people of color from We the People got

involved in ACT UP. And today, I think to the extent that there is an ACT UP, they're mostly people who came out of We the People. I went to an ACT UP meeting just a few months ago, at their request to talk to them about AIDS housing, and I knew the people there because they had been at We the People fifteen, twenty, thirty years ago, and they're still holding the fort. But what ACT UP did not want to do, and was clear it was never going to do, was organize around where AIDS funding went in Philadelphia, and that was very important to We the People, so we sort of divided up the activism agenda so that we never got in each other's way.

DAN ROYLES: With them doing more of the medical advocacy?

DAVID FAIR: Mostly advocacy around health care issues, and having a standard for AIDS, and making sure AIDS treatments were available to poor people and all that kind of stuff. They would be supportive, they would come to demonstrations or actions that We the People was taking. So we had a hunger strike, for example, in I think it was 1988 or 1989, at Betak, which was the only AIDS-specific nursing home in the region, that was dying because their funding was just inadequate. And We the People held a hunger strike there for seventeen days, a group of people with HIV and myself, living off juices for those seventeen days, and it was very visible and very public and there was a lot of media around it and ACT UP was very supportive of that, and they were very supportive of Betak. They had occupied Betak before it was opened because it was supposed to open but then they were dragging their feet on opening it, so ACT UP had moved a whole bunch of people to live in the building while they were waiting for it to be opened as a nursing home. So we coordinated those kinds of activities.

DAN ROYLES: To what extent did Philadelphia ACT UP during that time take issues of AIDS and race as part of their agenda?

DAVID FAIR: I would say not much. Probably by the late nineties they were more conscious of those issues. But the epidemic was changing, too. It was like, the reality is that after protease inhibitors hit, people started to be able to stay healthy. And so the AIDS system shifted from a system that was the AIDS service system as opposed to prevention education. Prevention education in Philadelphia has almost always been focused predominantly, once the government money started to flow, predominantly on people of color. When it was mostly money being raised by the gay community, it was mostly white gay men. When the AIDS service system started, it was mostly to care for people with AIDS who were white gay men, and even when the money started to flow, it was easier to find a white gay man who had AIDS than it was to find a black man who had AIDS, or a black woman who had got the disease because of heterosexual behavior or whatever. It took a while for BEBASHI and other organizations like that to be well known enough in the black community for people to feel like they could come to them. But it was probably—and this is one of the reasons looking back that I think I was starting to feel burned out in 1996 when I left We the People and stopped doing full-time AIDS work, was because the epidemic was changing and the people who were sick were predominantly people of color, and predominantly people with many, many social problems, social needs. And the classic Philadelphia, like the *Philadelphia* movie, the classic dying white gay man who's a professional, who's a lawyer or whatever, they were invisible, starting to get more and more invisible, and the system shifted in terms of its demographics of its population in

pretty dramatic ways in the late nineties. And I think that was when ACT UP started to pay more attention to those issues. In my head I think it became harder and harder for me to argue for AIDS exceptionalism, because I couldn't really argue why a healthy homeless person with AIDS should have a specialized housing program when a very sick homeless person who didn't have AIDS was supposed to die on the street. That didn't make any sense to me, and so it was harder for me to make the argument for the resources that I had been making for years. Plus the fact that people were living longer, we weren't going to as many funerals, and I didn't feel the same urgency about it as I had felt previously, so in the middle of 1996 I decided I wasn't going to do AIDS anymore. I ended up in the hospital with a diagnosis of PTSD because I had gotten myself so ensconced in AIDS politics and the AIDS world that I needed to recover from that, and since that time I've been mostly on the fringes.

DAN ROYLES: That was in 1996?

DAVID FAIR: Nineteen ninety-six.

DAN ROYLES: So then that was when you started to transition out of—

DAVID FAIR: Out of AIDS stuff.

DAN ROYLES: Making AIDS the focus of your professional career.

DAVID FAIR: I stayed very involved in We the People up until its demise, but other than that, I haven't been very involved in AIDS work. My partner runs an AIDS program up in Kensington.

DAN ROYLES: What program is that?

DAVID FAIR: Its official name is Preventing HIV Project. In the neighborhood it's called Get Up, and it's really like a mini We the People at Kensington and Somerset, in the heart of where all the injection drug users are. And he can proudly claim that he finds more new HIV-positive people than any other program in the city, including the hospitals, because he's right in the center of the action. He doesn't have anything like the resources that, when I left We the People, we had a two-and-a-half million dollar budget. He has a budget of 150 thousand dollars.

DAN ROYLES: If you could characterize your legacy for Philadelphia AIDS politics, how would you do that?

DAVID FAIR: Well I could argue why I was in the end a negative influence or why I was in the end a positive influence. Obviously I believe I was a positive influence. I think that we have an AIDS system that's more sensitive to, and was more sensitive earlier to the socio-economic and political aspects of the AIDS epidemic than any other big city in the country, and that we have a framework of AIDS services that stills exists, even though it's not as big as it once was, that really covers all the bases from soup to nuts. It's like, we can pretty much find somebody who's doing the work that needs to be done for people with AIDS in Philadelphia, whereas in other cities there's whole areas of work, like home care or whatever, that aren't there, you just can't find them. And I want some credit for that, that I helped create that system, and that I helped create the dynamic that forced the powers that be, whether they were white gay men who just happened to find themselves in positions of power, or whether they were political officials or healthcare officials, hospital directors

who forced them early on to notice that this was really an epidemic that has to do with poverty, and that white gay men were—I don't want to use the wrong term here, but they were, it was almost like an unintended consequence, whatever they call it when you bomb a city and innocent victims—collateral damage. The white gay community was almost collateral damage during the epidemic, that is wiping out the black gay community in this country, and is wiping out a significant portion of the black community generally, and the Latino community generally, because of poverty, not because of their race. And that we have that language in Philadelphia in a way that nobody else has it, and I want some credit for that because I think it's a good thing. On the other hand, I think of Chicago, which had many of the same debates, but the AIDS epidemic in Chicago has always been part of the Chicago public health agenda. They had public hospitals in Philadelphia—I mean in Chicago—I think we developed differently in Philadelphia because we haven't had a public hospital since 1976. So we never had a locus of influence around public health care, and we don't really have much of a public health system in Philadelphia. We're a survival-of-the-fittest kind of health system, very capitalist, very post-industrial, but in Chicago and in New York they have big public health systems, and in the end they have many of the same kinds of services that we developed in Philadelphia, and maybe they developed them better because they were part of the systems. They were later, I mean we were ahead of everybody. In 1987 you did not have AIDS housing in New York, you did not have AIDS home care systems, you did not have counseling and testing sites spread out throughout the whole region. We did all of that in Philadelphia before it was done any place else. But you could argue that the disruption, the constant fighting over AIDS, and even today people just sort of sigh when they think of the self-destructiveness of the AIDS service system. If

that had been avoided, things might have been better, and I'm willing to admit that, and I know I was part of the reason why it wasn't avoided. I was one of the loudest and most antagonistic and aggressive voices in that debate, so I feel proud about it because I think I was right, but there was an alternative path the AIDS system could have taken. I'm not unilaterally responsible for the fact it didn't take that path, but I have a big piece of responsibility for not taking the more traditional, slow public health response that might have today, in 2012, might have created a more comprehensive AIDS service system, or a more competent one than we have today. Because I worry about the quality of AIDS services today, that we had low standards during my time because it was just about keeping people alive, it wasn't about quality of life so much. Now it's different. But I worry that the mainstream AIDS system still can't find the people my partner really can find up at Kensington and Somerset. That he can find them but can't connect them to care, often because the system that does the healthcare doesn't treat them with respect, tells them they have to get off the needle before they can get their AIDS medications. I worry that our system is conscious of its failings but is not doing as much as it used to when there were louder voices complaining about them, if that makes any sense.

DAN ROYLES: No, it does. Any final thoughts, anything you didn't get to say?

DAVID FAIR: I guess I do want to say that there are people who were working in the AIDS world when I was at my height, I guess, and one of the themes of this other paper that I was telling you about, the PhD paper, the thesis, was that there was something wrong with having a white man play such an influential role in communities of color, in organizing communities of color, and I respect that position as well. I do believe that there is an

opportunity for white people to do something around racism and around what is to me still a fundamentally racist society, and a fundamentally racist health and social service system, that we don't have to position ourselves as though we are the leaders of movements. I don't honestly believe that I was the leader of those movements, and those actions that I was involved in. I was a leader, but I wasn't the leader. I brought to the table relationships, because of my position at the union, because of my Ivy League education, connections because I was a white man and it's still better to be a white man than any other kind of person in American society in terms of access and clout. I made a choice to use those resources to help people who I thought otherwise would never be able to get a voice, would never be able to assert themselves and have some real power. And I don't think of that as me taking advantage of that community, as some people have charged me with. I don't think of it as a plantation type thing, where I'm a plantation owner and using that constituency for my own purposes, whatever they might be. I think what I was doing was being a responsible person who was white and saw what was happening, saw what white people were doing that was harming a segment of the community, and used my resources to do something about that. And I wish more people would do that. I wish we weren't so sensitive to thinking that white people should not be talking about racism or complaining about racism, because I think it's a white person's problem and it's a white community problem, and it's white culture's problem, and the white culture has to solve it.

DAN ROYLES: Okay. Thank you very much.

end of interview