

JUNE 3, 2012 · 7:06 PM

Lessons in activism

Film: United in Anger: A History of ACT UP

Between 1981 and 1985, 40,000 Americans had already died of AIDS as people in power stood idly by.

It took a movement of grassroots activists in New York City to change the course of AIDS in America. Numbering no more than 7,000 people at their peak, the ACT UP movement brought about massive reform to AIDS medications, healthcare and education. Through the use of creative media tactics, they ruffled Wall Street, disrupted the Church, and shamed politicians and the medical community into saving lives.

This movement is the subject of a new documentary called, *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*.

I had the chance to speak to both producers of the film, Jim Hubbard (Q & A) and Sarah Schulman (video), while they were in Toronto for Hot Docs 2012.

Sarah Schulman hot docs 2012.mov



Interview with Co-Producer Jim Hubbard

You were one of the earliest members of the ACT UP movement and one of the first filmmakers to chronicle its unfolding story. What was the mood like at those early ACT UP meetings?

The one word that describes it is desperation. A large number of young people were dying of this new disease. The government wasn't paying attention. The mainstream media wasn't paying attention and the services weren't being provided. People in the community had to provide the services that rightly should have come from the government. It got to the point where a political response was absolutely necessary and that was what ACT UP provided.

What was your reason for making this film?

There are two large bodies of video work that make this film possible. One is the [ACT UP Oral History Project](#), which began in June of 2001 and consists of 128 interviews of 1 to 4 hours each with people who were involved in the movement in some way. Then there is the AIDS activist video collection, which is made up of over 1,000 hours of footage taken by over 30 video activists during the same time. I always thought that a film would come out of both of these bodies of work and this is that film.

Privacy & Cookies: This site uses cookies. By continuing to use this website, you agree to their use.
To find out more, including how to control cookies, see here: [Cookie Policy](#)

Close and accept



Jim Hubbard

You had a lot of material to go through. What was the editing process like?

I wanted this film to be comprehensible to someone who wasn't involved in the movement. I had to get someone else to finish editing the film about a year ago, a young woman named Ali Cotterill. She's too young to remember most of it. I thought, if it was comprehensible to her, it would be comprehensible to anyone watching it. I think it is.

ACT UP used the media amazingly well to get its message across. Do you think this movement could have been so successful today in an age of corporate controlled media?

The sentence that is most uttered in the Oral History Project is, "We could never do that today". In terms of the media, it may be that you wouldn't have to do that today because with Facebook Twitter and Blogging there are other ways of reaching people that weren't available in the 1980s. ACT UP didn't have email. The way people were activated was through a phone tree. The first people called 10 people, then each of those called 10 more, and so on. It was the equivalent of social media. It was a little more cumbersome but it worked

Could you compare the ACT UP movement to the Stonewall uprising in any way?

The difference was that Stonewall was an event that changed things, it spawned all of these groups. ACT UP as a group lasted longer. The connection is that ACT UP literally changed the world in several ways. One was that the drugs that we have today came about because of ACT UP agitation. Of course if the Reagan administration had reacted to AIDS as a medical crisis as it should have in 1981, we wouldn't have had the crisis and it wouldn't be a worldwide problem with 30 million people infected in Africa. ACT UP forced the American government to do the research and provide the services to change the way that people dealt with AIDS.

Where was the line in terms of being too radical? I think about the Stop the Church action where activists disrupted a Sunday mass at St. Patrick's cathedral to protest the Church's refusal to endorse condom use or sex education.

I'm not sure there ever was any answer to where the line got drawn except to say that the line was violence, and that was never crossed. In terms of Stop the Church, I was ambivalent about that action then, less so now. My memory was that I did not film it. I went because I felt I had to but I wasn't sure it was a great idea to disrupt mass. Ten years ago, I found two videocassettes labeled "St. Patrick's Cathedral". I didn't film, I videotaped. It wasn't quite the real thing in my mind. That's how my ambivalence worked out, and of course a number of the shots from those cassettes are in the film.

How do you see this film influencing future generations?

I think the long-term life of this film will be in museums and colleges and universities and high schools. It will be a touchstone for young people in their understanding of the world. What I want is for ACT UP to take its rightful place in mainstream history. I see this film an ambassador going out and saying, 'look at this, this was important'.

ADVERTISEMENT



Privacy & Cookies: This site uses cookies. By continuing to use this website, you agree to their use. To find out more, including how to control cookies, see here: [Cookie Policy](#)

Close and accept