



GENERATIONS OF CHAMPions: Profiles of Activists

Interviews by Kevin Chinzhe Lo

Walt Senterfitt, one of CHAMP's beloved Board Co-Chairs, started his career as an activist growing up in the segregated South. In his 40 years of activism, Senterfitt has been a community organizer, high school teacher, nurse, health care union organizer and pursued a graduate degree in epidemiology in his mid-40's. He currently works for the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services and is a Board member of Being Alive in Los Angeles.



Q: What started your career as an activist?

A: *I led my first demonstration when I was 16. It was at a science camp up in Maine where my black roommate was not allowed to get a hair cut from the town barber in the summer of 1960.*

Q: What was your greatest experience as an activist?

A: *In 1982, I was one of the key organizers and instigators of a mobilization to stop both an American Nazi party planning to attack and destroy gay pride in Chicago and a march by the KKK in Washington, D.C. People resonated to the message that whatever we feel personally, we know that we have a common enemy. I'm particularly proud not because of the small victories they represented but for the larger lessons and the hope that it's possible to mobilize along similar principles in a struggle.*

Q: Do you ever lose sight of your mission?

A: *I would say that at times I lose focus because there is often a contradiction between near-term winnable struggles and building the basis for more deep rooted, radical and long lasting changes. I think that a revolutionary world view is what sustains me when I feel myself getting bent out of shape in one immediate struggle or another. I'm getting more*

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tired as I get older and my health has become more problematic. I sometimes wish not that I could give up but I could retire to a quieter, elderly state. Age slows us all. However, I don't think in any fundamental sense my spirit and vision has flagged or my politics moved to the right.

Q: What would you say to prospective activists?

A: I can't promise through action that you will improve the material conditions of your life in the short run, but I can say that you will most likely feel personally stronger and able to cope through the energy you get from solidarity and turning pain into anger, into action. Working with others to take even small steps to change history elevates your life to a higher plane in terms of the message you leave for the people who come after you, for the people that you influence in your everyday life.

Q: What kind of advice/wisdom would you give prospective advocates?

A: Start asking questions and find out what's going on in your community. Follow your curiosity. Secondly, read.

Q: What do you hope to remember about your career?

A: The consistent mantra for me is to do what I can to fight for a world where people are not oppressed by extraneous divisions of class, race, gender and sexuality. To replace capitalism with a form of social order and organization that encourages the fulfillment of human potential rather than the squelching of it. I think I will be able to say that I have left my little corner of the world a little bit better and that's ultimately all that I can expect of myself.



Elizabeth Lindsey, 23, is an activist and volunteer for CHAMP and ACT UP Philadelphia, and is a full-time employee of Philadelphia's Maternity Care Coalition. She began her career as an activist organizing a caravan tour for the Pennsylvania Abolitionists United Against the Death Penalty. Elizabeth also organized queer and black students at her alma mater, Swarthmore College.

Q: What are you currently doing?

A: *I want to work on getting STD prevention information out to communities of color because there are very few working class dykes of color who know anything about STD prevention. As an African American woman I know that we're the group that is most affected HIV right now so I'm very excited to work on prevention. I'm also on the fundraising committee of a group called the Community Youth Organization Campaign. It's a grassroots organization that does immigrant organizing and anti-deportation work in Philadelphia's Chinatown and South Philadelphia.*

Q: Do you ever lose focus as an activist?

A: *Yes, definitely. I think all activists do. It's exhausting especially because it's hard to balance having a full time job, dealing with personal issues and doing activism. I think I've realized that my activism sustains me in so many ways.*

Q: How do you stay clear on your mission and inspire yourself to advocate?

A: *I try to remember that I'm not doing activism because it's something I have to do. I'm doing it because it's something that I want to do and that actually adds to my life and fulfills me in a way that other things don't. I wouldn't wake up and feel the same way about myself if I didn't do this everyday.*

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Q: Do you ever feel like you want to give up?

A: *I definitely have felt that way. Sometimes I feel so overwhelmed by things that are going on in my life. I think that as activists we need to remember to take care of ourselves.*

Q: What is your favorite part of being an activist?

A: *My favorite part of being an activist - this is going to sound so cliché - is making connections with other people. I love what I see in AIDS activism because you're actually working side by side with a wide range of people who are affected by HIV/AIDS on different levels.*

Q: What is your least favorite part of activism?

A: *On a personal level I've experienced racism from activist communities in terms of there being an unspoken code of what you should look like if you're an activist, how you should talk. It's a really racist and classist barrier. People make assumptions because I don't shop in thrift stores but it's because I grew up poor and that's what I'm trying to move away from. That somehow makes me seem less political and it doesn't.*

Q: What would you like to say to those who are inactive or apathetic?

A: *I'd like to say that there is a space for everyone in activism on the level they want. My hope is that we can create systems where people feel comfortable coming in as themselves and feel that they are really making a difference.*

Q: What would you say to prospective activists?

A: *Find someone who's experienced that can show you the ropes. Someone who can support you and answer questions because it can be intimidating to walk into a room full of people who have been doing AIDS activism for 20 years who seem to know everything. They have something incredible to bring, that new voices are always needed.*

Q: How do you hope to remember your career as an activist?

A: *Well I hope it never ends. I would like to feel like I've been true to my ideals and that I've made a difference and that I've lived my politics.*