

# **Our Solidarity was the Solution - Looking back on 2017: Rising and Resisting for Two Decades in NYC**

Benjamin Heim Shepard

**Abstract:** This first-person narrative reviews the resistance to the first year of the Trump Administration. The author recalls a trip to Washington DC to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power in Washington DC, as well as three other trips to fight the assault on social policy by the Trump Administration and the Republican controlled congress, getting arrested each time. Back in New York, the author worked with his union and engaged in civil disobedience fighting for the homeless with Voices of Community Activists and Leaders (VOCAL). The author reviews debates about strategies and tactics, as well as the efforts of groups such as ADAPT, Rise and Resist, Housing Works, Center for Popular Democracy, ACT UP, New Sanctuary Coalition, and VOCAL. He considers the friendships which support such efforts to renew democracy from the bottom up, while fighting the war on the poor.

**Keywords:** solidarity, ADAPT, Rise and Resist, Housing Works, Center for Popular Democracy, ACT UP, New Sanctuary Coalition, Erica Garner, Charles Shively, Gilbert Baker, James Lawson, civil disobedience, Charles King, Mark Milano, Eiryn Griest Schwartzman, Fighting for Our Lives AIDS Candlelight Vigil, Occupy Wall Street

I moved to New York in September of 1997. Sure, I had been around, visiting between grad school and college, following a girl up Vassar for a year in 1990, drinking at Max Fish on Ludlow, coming into the city in the 1970's, driving through a sea of cars on Houston and Canal Streets. But 1997, was the year, I made the love affair official. And with the exception of a month or few abroad, a fall and spring semester in 2007 there, I have been here. My twentieth year in the city was the most abundant in years. I saw more music, acted up, rising, resisting, traveling and teaching as much as possible, navigating a most savage of times. On the one hand, many of the things I have fought for as an activist for two decades - a stronger public sector union, health and social welfare programs, and a clean environment - have all taken significant hits. But no one is out for the count, none of us. Still the threats were everywhere. So we responded and pushed back on all sides, organizing, defending our friends facing deportation, women fighting harassment, homeless people looking for shelter, disabled people fighting for healthcare.



Solidarity was expanding everywhere, even when I was the first to get out of jail. Everyone needs support. Scenes from two out of four arrests in the first year of the Trump administration.

Writing about the healthcare protests in DC, my friend TW Collins referred to Dorris Lessing (1962, p. 434), who wrote: “Very few people really care about freedom, about liberty, about the truth, very few. Very few people have guts, the kind of guts on which a real democracy has to depend. Without people with that sort of guts a free society dies or cannot be born.” Here is to those who have the “guts” Collins concluded. This year, a few of my heroes, those with a lot of these guts, shuffled off. These were people who looked to no one but themselves to find solutions, stepping up, organizing selflessly, listening actively, and building a working consensus around ways to combat oppression, using gestures of care and creativity. A few of these included Erica Garner, Charles Shively, and Gilbert Baker. Each went in their own ways pointing to the utility of love, art, and collective mourning; one could argue both Garner and Baker died of broken hearts. May they rest in power. The last time I saw Gilbert was at a Rise and Resist meeting in January.



Gilbert Baker at a Rise and Resist Meeting at the Center, January 2017, casually dressed as a member of a concentration camp, adorned with the pink star that he thought so drab, ever aware of the meaning of symbols. It was the last time I'd ever see this quiet hero. I left the meeting early. He stayed, seemingly knowing what was at stake.

With their spirits in mind, here is the story of the year of a year of activism, teaching, making friends, renewing friendships, watching some go, and others come my way as we fought our way through the first year of presidency the majority of the voters had not wanted.



This writer making new friends at the Trump inauguration.

The day of Donald Trump's inauguration, I met my friends with Rise and Resist and ACT UP at West 13th Street, and got on the bus to DC at midnight, driving into the night. I mostly slept on the way there, dozing in and out, thinking about the fifteen or sixteen trips to jail over the past two decades since I have been involved with non-violent direct action. These expressive actions were always a useful means for a hyperactive emotional kid to act up and do something with that

well of emotion bubbling inside. They were ways to scream when my friends were getting sick or the city was bulldozing community spaces or restricting civil liberties or unions or starting wars or police were beating people, whatever the issue was. Civil disobedience opens a delicious form of defiance and expression. It's always been an outlet for emotion and communication. Hopefully it could be one again. As my friend Savitri D once wrote: "The shared experience of being arrested can be powerful, also weirdly intimate." Doing so, people usually find a lot of common ground as solidarity expands, lasting through time.

Riding through the night I was getting more and more excited about the weekend. I would not be wandering aimlessly. I would be going straight at the darkness. The sun was nowhere to be seen when we arrived in DC at 5 am. The city was filled with people in red "Make America Great Again" hats. These were not urbanites. Mostly men, white men, and a few women, the line to get inside the inauguration was filled with them, all white. I was supposed to meet Tim Murphy, a New York writer, whose work I adore. He's written about drug use and HIV in the past, AIDS protests I've taken part in, etc. For the inauguration, he seemed to move into the mindset of one of the Trump supporters New Yorkers seem to know very little about. We made our way inside and through security for the inauguration ceremonies at the United States Capitol. Tickets were easy to come by. Few wanted to actually attend. By 6:45 am we'd made our way past security. We'd have to stand there for five hours before the magic moment when we'd seek to disrupt the inauguration, without getting found out first. I kept blowing the cover.

"Benjamin!" Tim scolded me when I told him about us talking about his book at my Marxist reading group.

"Look around you."

Looking, I saw a sea of red hats and white people, not a person of color in sight. We found our standing room only spot by 7 am, meeting up with Jacques and Jackie and Yougourthen. Tim stayed in character, chatting with Trump supporters for hours.

"Things that happened in the past do not matter," Tim declared.

"It's been dark for eight years," one of his new friends replied, shaking their head.

"I think he's liking this too much," I whispered to Jacques, of the Yes Men. "Like Ed Meese condemning the porno he's documenting. He's getting Stockholm syndrome." Murphy was at it for hours.

The crowd was getting more and more excited as the jumbotron showed Trump's limo making its way to the Capitol.

"He's coming! He's coming!" a woman to my right cheered, looking at the image of the limo making its way to the ceremony, in a scene reminiscent of Triumph of the Will.

"USA USA USA!" the crowd screamed.

"It would sound better in the original German," I moaned to Jacques.

By 11:30 am, dignitaries were being introduced. Bill and Hillary, even Jimmy Carter received boos.

"You guys can't boo Jimmy Carter!" I followed. Most agreed. Things only got worse when the minority leader Chuck Schumer read a civil war soldier's letter to his wife.

"Boo!!!" "Sit Down!" "Get off!!!" "You're killing me!" the Trump supporters screamed, sounding boorish. "Drain the swamp!"

A hushed silence filled the air as the president elect begin his oath of office. And screams filled the air.

"Inept illegit" we bellowed as Trump began his oath of office and we attempted to disrupt the normalization of the transfer of power.

"Not my president!"

"You elected a fascist!!!!" Tim screamed.

A commotion ensued. I was worried we were going to get beaten up. There were thousands of them there. One man put his hand around my neck. And another grabbed the whistle I was blowing.

We kept screaming, along with about ten others planted throughout the crowd. And all the world saw the images of us being beaten. And the police started to pull us out. I was more than happy to oblige, walking with the policeman.

"Thanks for being cool about it," the policeman told me.

"No problem. You guys have your hands full today," I told the policeman.

Charles King of Housing Works, who trained me in civil disobedience always said be good to your arresting officers, making friends if you can. One of his arresting officers at the ACT UP Stop the Church action in 1989 invited him out on a date. Charles demurred. But he later regretted it.

People all over the inauguration had acted up in union, one woman declaring "pussy grabber," another man stayed when the police did not come and the crowd took him down, strangling him.

The police escorted us out of the inauguration, confiscating our tickets but not sending us to jail, where I thought we'd at least spend the night.

Adrenaline was oozing out of my ears. But it felt ok. I was glad I had taken part in the big action.

It was better than staying home, more empowering. I spent the rest of the day navigating between tear gas, police, and anarchists in the streets. It was eerie walking the streets, watching police and anarchists clash, liberals and Trumpheads go to loggerheads, as the Trump crew took control of the helm, erasing language about climate change and reproductive autonomy from White House websites.

In the weeks before and after Trump's election, we-a collective we-poured into the streets-immigrants, Muslims, students, women, people of color, LGBT activists-and it seemed all of New York. A few days before, on MLK day, members of the newly-formed anti-Trump group Rise & Resist staged a cough-in at Trump International Hotel and Tower in New York City, to fight against the radical changes to the American healthcare system proposed by the Trump Administration and Republicans, coughing and chanting, "We Love Obamacare, Trumpcare Makes Us Sick!" Saturday February 4, 2017, LGBT communities converged at the Stonewall Monument in solidarity with Muslim, Latino, refugee, and immigrant communities being targeted by the Trump administration. On the way to Sheridan Square, I passed thousands with signs, declaring, "Stronger Together," "Gays Support Muslims," and my favorite, "Never Underestimate the Power of a Faggot with a Tambourine." Solidarity seemed to be expanding everywhere. The courts pushed back against the immigration ban.

My city of friends was working. Every time I come to an event like this, I feel like I live in a city of friends, with people I have known for two solid decades popping up everywhere, people I have acted up with, gone to jail with, ridden bikes with, prayed at Judson Memorial Church with throughout my years here. This is where the democracy of the streets matters. Rather than throw up our hands in despair, we all tapped into a collective spirit of do-it-yourself action, connecting all of our stories and ambitions, forming a collective community capable of igniting democracy from the bottom. This DIY spirit helped us find a route to fashion a better world, building alternatives that support mutual aid, green space, social welfare programs, community gardens, bike lanes, wind power, expressions of care and creativity, within a public commons of our own creation.

Each week, something we cared about was taking a hit. The president was attacking Muslims so we flooded into the streets at JFK airport. He was attacking the Paris Climate Accord, so communities pushed back; Michael Bloomberg and Jerry Brown declared the US would maintain its commitment to the accord, regardless of inaction at the federal level. The president retaliated with taking on more programs, including restricting the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. (Many of my students are part of the DACA program. They come to class early, take care of their parents and siblings, work extra jobs and do internships on the side. They are some of my best students.) The president said he would give Congress six months to fix the problem. It was hard to imagine a solution forthcoming when the issue of immigration had been a political quagmire for decades. Tears welled up in my students' eyes when they spoke about the problem - the uncertainty of wondering if they really were going to be sent back, expelled to places that weren't home, the places their parents had brought them from. The cruelty of the president was astounding. Despite it and in the face of it, each week we responded to his callousness with more and more mutual aid, direct action, and community-building.

Over the year, many of us debated what was the best approach to coping with what looked like a fascist president at the helm. Some organized with Rise and Resist and its ACT UP roots, inclusive and direct action-based; its model was critical in the current moment. Some resented the credit Rise and Resist got for bringing so many people into organizing.

Others supported Antifa and their approach to taking on the ascendant fascism. Some thought the first amendment should be curtailed in the face of hate speech or opinions we disliked. For others though, it was more important to highlight voices we care for and support them instead of opposing the ones we find offensive. We can all protest. And can talk with those with whom we disagree, track hate speech, confront it, educate, fight ignorance with knowledge and support public education so people have tools to combat bigotry and break down stigma. But shutting down events among those we dislike feels backward. It does not prefigure a better world. And it invites a backlash from the state, inviting an even bigger crackdown. I liked the pies the Pieman used to throw at right wingers. What I do not support is the notion that everyone has to march to one drumbeat. And if we oppose shutting down this or that tactic, we are the enemy, as some implied. Robert P George and Cornell West suggest that rather than shut down discourse, might it better serve the cause of truth seeking to engage the speaker. "If we don't protect the free speech rights of all," says Brenda L. Jones, executive director of the ACLU-EM, "we risk having the government arbitrarily decide what is, or is not, acceptable speech." As an educator, I appreciate the University of Chicago position that the campus supports vigorous debate, instead of trigger warnings and safe zones. Academic freedom means people with different positions have to be allowed to talk. I invite this from my students, reminding students civility matters, but so does the right to disagree. It is boring to share all the same positions.

Over the year, I saw elements of both right and left authoritarian thinking, seemingly intolerant of different ideas, favoring vanguardism, and opposed to debate. Friends from the right and left walked away from dialogue, disengaging and withdrawing into their silos. Sadly, there are times when the left feels as stultifying as the right. And both extremes seem to favor restrictions on free speech. The solution to a democracy deficit is more debate, not less.

My colleague at the City University of New York, author Sarah Schulman, referred to these debates with hope: "Confused American leftists realize that stopping people from talking is not as effective a tactic as saying what kind of world we DO want to live in."

"The people preventing Republicans from safely assembling on the streets of Portland may consider themselves fierce opponents of the authoritarianism growing on the American right," wrote Peter Beinart (2017). "In truth, however, they are its unlikeliest allies." I appreciate the need to make racists afraid again. But I also hope the left can maintain a commitment to a Gandhian repertoire of non-violent civil disobedience. Violence begets violence. It invites crackdowns. This was a key tenet in James Lawson's training of activists during the Civil Rights movement. When we become violent, we become the monsters we oppose. I still believe we can change the tides of history by maintaining a commitment to non-violence. It has worked in the past. It worked this year, and I will believe it will work again.

It is possible for the creative and passionate ideals of anarchism to merge with current



movements to create a better world, but there has to be room to disagree. Only then can we begin to collaborate on the ground, as anarchists and peaceniks, liberals and radicals, atheists and church-goers have always done - when they have come together rather than fight each other. Over the year, anarchists and Catholic Priests fought white supremacists in Charlotte; liberals and radicals converged in Washington; radicals and immigrants participated in Jericho at Federal Plaza for those facing deportation, and many others crowded the streets in front of Trump Tower in NYC as the city swelled with a conversation about what real democracy could mean. In between fits and starts, we began to expand on the lessons of the debate over diversity of tactics hashed out during the global justice movement years, allowing a thousand flowers to bloom, not just the ideas we support. Many came to see that our solidarity was our solution. I hope we can learn to broaden and expand the tent of the left into a united front of opposition to the fascist right, supporting, rather than undermining each other, and collectively imagining something brighter. I hope we can work on inviting and including, because, as we saw in the results of the 2016 election, those excluded from the conversation will turn elsewhere.

As the year went on, I ran into fellow activists I had not seen in years. Kate Barnhart and I ended up in handcuffs three times together. I had not seen Jay Walker since 1998. This year, we ran into each other at event after event, went to D.C. and were arrested together, talking like old school chums as we drove. Austin Horse decided to join us the night before one of the trips to D.C., and brought a bust in honor of a fellow bike messenger who had no insurance and died. My friends from Housing Works and Center for Popular Democracy helped organize the D.C. healthcare actions in ways that were inviting, inclusive and compelling for everyone involved. Emails were open. So were invitations. Mom's and their kids, people with disabilities, elders, high school students, queer and faith based activists were all part of their coalition taking part in a transparent model of mass civil disobedience.

Mark Milano, an old ACT UP veteran, organized the cough-in at Trump Hotel and the corresponding D.C. actions. He said that as a person living with AIDS, the actions helped give his life meaning. He said the struggle gives his existence and his very being a sense of meaning. At almost every demonstration, I ran into my friend Jenny Heinz, whom I've known since the early days of the anti-war movement around the Iraq Invasion back in 2003 when we were arrested at the Carlyle Group. Jenny believes formal democracy is broken. To her, there is no separation of life from the art we are consuming, and our activism should have no separation either. She told a story about going to the Lincoln Center wearing a small sign that said: "NO! In the name of humanity, I refuse to accept the rise of fascism in America." The security told her she could not carry it.

"But I don't go anywhere without it," she replied. "I'm asking everyone what they are going to do about this mess." She said it was a public space. He told her again to take it off and escorted her out. The next day she got on the phone with Norm Siegel, her old lawyer, who had supported her and the grannies who got arrested attempting to register for military during the last Gulf War. And he started inquiring.

"You should call the Times," I told her at the protest in Washington Square Park at a rally for the death of presidency.



After the protest, she called my contact with the paper. The paper of record started covering Lincoln Center's hostility to free speech, and the Lincoln Center changed their policy. Jenny had a way of getting things done. This was not her first time around this rodeo.

"We're gonna have to have some fun along the way here, everyone," said the MC, smiling during Rise and Resist's Mock Funeral for the Presidency. "Otherwise what is the point?"

"We're just getting started! We're just getting started!" everyone chanted during the event wailing, honoring, remembering, grieving, marching, singing, chanting, and demanding the rebirth of a Presidency dedicated to the service of all peoples and "sacred fire of liberty" that President George Washington swore to uphold.

Throughout the spring, we rallied for education, for science, for the homeless, for women, and our friends who were facing deportation.

In March, we arrived to accompany Ravi and others from the Sanctuary movement for their check ins with Immigration Customs and Enforcement and hold a rally in their support.

"I see a wall of love..." Ravi declared looking out a sea of bodies at Foley Square, elected representatives, members the Sanctuary Movement and their supporters, before he went inside for his check-in. It seemed all of New York was there. This is our New York! Immigrants are New York! Members of the congregation at Ravi's church, Judson Memorial, were there. For Judson, "Sanctuary is a strategy we choose driven both by patriotism and the decisive compassion cultivated through Christian practice. No one is a stranger or a foreigner to God."

During the Jericho walk, we surrounded the ICE building, locked hand in hand. Ravi walked upstairs into the Federal Building, with his preacher and supporters.

"We are Ravi!" the crowd screamed as he went up. "We are Ravi!"

Shortly, we heard the office decided not to hold Ravi, a friend saved by our resistance, at least for the moment.

Despite individual victories, the challenges of the new administration were every day. In the fall, we heard that the Supreme Court case of *Janus v. AFSCME* - a case Elizabeth Warren warned us "could defund unions for teachers" - was on the docket. The case was a direct assault on labor, workers, and, by extension, higher education as a whole. So members of our union started talking, connecting, and recommitting to supporting each other, in as broad a way as possible. Faced with the multiple crises, we needed everyone out there doing various kinds of organizing, collaborating, and cooperating. Of course, this meant respecting the different ways people could contribute. Some people made calls and others put their bodies on the lines with direct action.

In July, activists around the country, including Housing Works, ACT UP, National ADAPT, Rise and Resist, disability activists, liberals, and even a few anarchists, put all their skills together to stop the bills that were designed to kill the Affordable Care Act. Using every tool in

the kitchen sink, they lobbied, bird-dogged Senators, made office visits, sat in on hallways, and generally made a stink all summer long, as congress failed in their ACA repeal attempts all summer long.

My friend LA Kauffman posted a note on social media congratulating them. “Wow, let’s hear it for the heroes who won this health-care fight and showed not only that resistance works, but HOW it works.” Kauffman referred to the disabled people from National ADAPT who were the first to put their bodies on the line to block these hateful bills, taking bold action time and time again. She was thinking of the people with HIV and those who rely on Medicaid, organized through CPD Action, Housing Works Inc., Rise and Resist, and other groups, who sat in over and over again to fight for all of us. “This was a battle led and won by the most vulnerable among us: disabled people, queer folks, HIV+ folks. One key organizer told me she estimates that women made up 70% of those on the frontlines -- and a great many of the men who joined them were either gay or HIV+ or disabled or all of the above. They got on buses in the middle of the night, put their bodies directly right in the way of a government hellbent on depriving us of basic care, endured miserable hours in police custody, and then returned to do it all again. All the phone calls and all the local protests around the country played a big and crucial part, too, but direct action set the tone and led the way. I am in awe of all who fought so hard, and so grateful.”

The creative outpouring of theatrical and disruptive organizing served as a useful testament to the ongoing utility of social movement activity favoring a diversity of tactics, rather than a strict adherence to one model or another. There is no one right way to respond to the previous unimaginable political reality we had found ourselves in. It was necessary for people to put their bodies on the line, picket, make phone calls, and keep their sense of humor.



Eiryn told me that the aca repeal would decimate medicare, limiting her right to life and liberty. Shes here to fight back! - with Eiryn Griest Schwartzman.

In the fall of 2017, I went to D.C. four times to fight the repeal and replace movement against healthcare. On my first trip, we took on Graham Cassidy’s healthcare bill, filling the hearing at the at Dirksen Senate Office Building with people in wheelchairs, screaming, rolling out of their wheelchairs, and causing commotion, before the senators pulled their support. I’ll never forget walking through D.C., seeing all the healthcare and disability activists - many in wheelchairs - and joining them to clog the halls of Congress, where we demanded that our representations would have to bear witness to those who depend on healthcare - to see us, united.

Senator Collins pulled her support for the bill during the hearing, sending the repeal effort to its end.

A month later, we were back, this time fighting the tax bill which would gut the ACA healthcare mandate and take 13 million people off healthcare. The Republicans had not passed one bill all year long, despite control of congress. They were desperate. But so were we. So were the disability activists pushing for access, defending the Americans with Disability Act and their to right live free, outside asylums and institutions, where they would be consigned without the support of Medicaid and the ADA.



Arrest number two in DC with disability activists.



Arrested trying to stop the rich from stealing from the poor in dc. the tax bill is the most regressive piece of legislation of my lifetime. Photo by Timothy Luceford. As Jennifer Flynn Walker wrote: "It's another day in Trump's America so we are shutting down another murderous hearing. CPD Action, Housing Works Inc."

I rode down to D.C. with Kate, Austin, and Timothy Luncford. On the drive from Brooklyn to DC, we told stories of the time we'd spent in jail, the direct action, and more. The stories helped us pass the time and create a collective mythology of our efforts. "We tell stories to give life

meaning,” says memoirist Amy Hoffman. “We impose structure on chaos. We choose a beginning and an end; we elevate some details and discard others; we try to find lessons and useful information,” (quoted in Becker, 2017). This is precisely what we were doing by sharing our experiences with each other.

Tim, a long-term AIDS survivor, was wearing a hat with a picture of Elizabeth Taylor, who he befriended during the early AIDS years. The hat included the words:

“Our compassion is more compelling than our need to blame,” Elizabeth Taylor.

“I guess we’re getting arrested with Elizabeth Taylor,” I noted.

We talked about his years of aids activism, and how he never let the fights or bickering get him down. “We are only on this planet but for so long, so I can’t let that stuff worry me,” he explained, his Zen philosophy an example this activist might do well to emulate. He smiled and told stories about bird dogging senators, following them into bathrooms and lobbying them, and talking with John McCain about cancer, before his last vote against ACA repeal.

I also ran into my friend Heather who works for Senator Sanders. She was not sure we could beat back this assault. She promised to call a friend who is a photographer to show up at the hearing. . All day long, we bird-dogged, asked questions, and generally annoyed the representatives on their way to the hearing. They seemed to surprised regular people were there asking questions. As senators walked into the hearing, we pled with them to kill the bill. Each one dismissed us, except for Sanders who got a rousing applause.

When Lindsey Graham called Jennifer Flynn “rude,” my friend Kate pointed out that the tax bill puts her health at risk. As the hearing began, more and more chaos ensued. Inside the hearing, several members of ADAPT started to pull themselves out of their wheelchairs. Mark Milano, who had spent weeks lobbying and speaking with receptionists, without ever getting access to actual decision makers, was wondering what to say. He was fully aware that as a man living with HIV and cancer that this bill would have a profound impact on his life. As the hearings began, he knew this was his chance to speak with the decision makers. He screamed, “Mic Check! I am 62-years old, a few years from Medicare. If enacted, this bill will prevent Medicare from paying for my cancer treatment.” Other disability activists had pulled themselves out of their wheelchairs, causing chaos to ensue as the hearings began.

While activists inside were mic checking, outside the hearing, we blocked the halls. “Health care is a right,” we chanted. “Kill the bill! Don’t kill us!” Wave after wave of people were arrested. Others were literally dragged away over the people blocking the elevators. When a reporter asked me why I was there, I said, “I’m here because this is the most regressive piece of legislation of my lifetime.” We spent the afternoon in jail. When we got out, we heard that several of the moderates were supporting the bill.

“You can only dodge bullets so long before eventually one hits you,” my friend Zach said. He had been arrested four times this year. “I got arrested this time because it’s a horrible, horrible

bill,” he explained. “I could not live with myself if I hadn’t done everything in my power to stop it.”

On the drive home, Austin, Kate, Tim and I talked over the events and read reports about the hearings. After I got home I added posted a note on Facebook: “Just back from D.C fighting America the greedy. This tax bill is the worst, most regressive bill I’ve seen. We have to push back harder, get more people calling and showing up, bird dogging, screaming at senators willing to steal from the poor to pay for the rich. People from Maine need to lean on Collins who caved. I saw Lindsey Graham call Jennifer Flynn Walker rude for reminding him that the CBO score for the bill has nothing to do with the bullshit he was spewing to the press. I saw people with disabilities haled away, moms with their kids in wheelchairs fighting for their children’s future, people with HIV fighting for healthcare which would save their lives, and still the Republicans plan to pass a tax bill adding a 1.4 trillion dollar tax giveaway, increasing taxes on those making less than \$75,000.00 a year so the Koch brothers and the elite can get a tax break. Is this America?”

I went down to D.C. one more time on December 18, 2017

Tim and I sat together on the bus ride down. We spoke with our fellow passengers about why we were protesting.

“We’re building a community here,” said Judy Pleune both members of an affinity group of elder organizers committed to civil disobedience, “This is how we expand the resistance.”

Mark Hannay of ACT UP was busy counting possible votes for the legislation.

Tim talked about the story of his activism that had grown out of his concerns for the health challenges faced by gay men as result of homophobia, hate, and later, HIV/AIDS. He attended his first Fighting for Our Lives AIDS Candlelight Vigil in 1987. At the march, one of his friends told him about an angry group that had just formed and was meeting at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in the West Village. He was talking about the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, several veterans of whom were organizing the healthcare demos in Washington.

Over the years, Tim has watched cohorts drop in and out of the group, yet he stays the course. “I wasn’t a member of the Swim Team,” a cohort of ACT UP’s cutest activists. “I wasn’t fucking around. Matt Ebert was always the chalk queen. When he left, I became it.”

I met Tim in one of these meetings two decades ago, around the same time I connected with Jennifer Flynn and Paul Davis.

“America has no idea what is about to hit them with this bill,” said Tim. It was especially relevant for his experience as a man living with HIV and cancer for years. He depends on the types of public health insurance that would be gutted by this bill. “Americans who have their parents live with them, who get Meals on Wheels a few days a week, they are going to lose that funding,” Tim continued. “They are not thinking about that.” The funding would change block

grants for healthcare, and create cuts to entitlements, money for transportation, schools, and more.

Our conversation switched between Tim's past, his time in New York, the present, and our current journey to Washington. "I want to go into Collins's office and rip the books off the wall," he vented. "She doesn't understand. I've been through cancer. This will kill me. I can't live without insurance."

Judy Pleume and Bev Price, on the bus in the back and joined our conversation about why we were traveling to D.C. again.

"We've been here for years," Judy explained. "We are now nothing but a body to get in the way. It is important to build a community. We're not sure we'll win."

But Bev argued that it was important for people to see that Americans give a damn. "We're not sheep. We can't just wait for 2018."

I have known Judy and Bev since the early days of the anti-war movement in 2003, where I also met Jenny Heinz. I asked Judy when she became an activist. "I was a Freedom Rider," she said. Bev was involved with the no-nukes movement.

"We are here to voice public opposition to the Tax Bill," explained Mark Hannay, who was sitting to the right of them reading. "And scare up opposition. Even if they pass something, they are going to have to fight for every inch."

When we arrived in Washington, we all converged at the Capital Skyline Hotel. I ran into Garrett Wilkinson and Gregg Gonsalves, who were chatting about the Kansas experiment and what happens when lawmakers radically slash taxes. Wilkinson is from Kansas. The experiment in Kansas robbed the budget of money for police, public education, and even the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System that administers benefit plans for state and local public employees.

"This is what the federal tax bill will do to the country," Gregg said. He was another ACT UP veteran, who now teaches at Yale.

While we waited for the outline of the plan for the day, I spoke with Wendy Brawer, who joined the action at the last minute. She was an environmentalist and explained why she was there. "I think the focus away from renewable culture makes it harder to make change, to push for renewables. With climate change impacting us in more ways every year, California had to spend some \$110 million dollars on fires. With no revenue, how will that be possible?"

While we were standing and talking, we met Stephanie, who was forced to jump out of a third story window during a fire. "The ACA coverage saved my life. It sounds morose, but thank goodness, my accident happened before 2017, when the ACA was still thriving. This bill takes away this possibility."

Jennifer and Paul started the training.

“When we fight, we win!” they chanted. “When we drag this out, we win. When we expose this criminal negligence, we win,” Paul said. “They thought they could pass ACA repeal and replace legislation the first day of the term. And then they didn’t get anything passed all year. They thought they could pass tax reform in November. And now here we are a week before Christmas and nothing has passed.”

They asked, “How many want to get arrested for the first time?” Many people raised their hands. There was a sea of applause.

“How many have been arrested three times?” I raised my hand along with several others. More applause.

“How many have been arrested over six times this year?” another group of protestors raised their hands.

We gave them a standing ovation.

The plan of the day was to lobby all day, do office visits with senators and members of the House till 8:00 p.m., when we’d stage a die-in in the Capitol Rotunda.

Paul explained that the House and the Senate want to vote this week. If Congress refused to respond to lobbying, acts of civil disobedience would take place all week long. Activists had to be aware they might be put through the system if they disrupted Congress.

“People are falsely arrested and put through the system all the time,” Jennifer said. “We have an obligation to bear witness to this pain.”

Before we broke into groups according to region, some DACA activists came to speak, pointing out that our struggle was their struggle and vice versa.

We saw the DACA folks throughout the day as we lobbied. We met with with Congresswoman Tenney’s staff, David Kinzler, and Senator Corker’s legislative director. “This is a bet on the American people!” he told us, arguing that the cuts would be offset with a trillion dollars in new anticipated revenue. We asked for his source for that.

He rattled off a few conservative think tanks.

“No real economist believes that,” said Arlene Geiger, an economics professor at CUNY. Trickle down has never worked.

When Kinzler asked how this bill could hurt the poor, Gregg Gonsalves responded with a discussion about excess death, a condition of preventable mortality caused by environmental hazards, poverty, disaster, austerity, or neglect. by “What was disheartening was the



disingenuousness of his remarks to us,” Gregg said when describing the meeting. “In defending the Senator’s flip-flop on the bill, Mr. Kinzler ended up making a case that the bill would pay for itself through economic growth. I’m not sure why the office had this late-stage conversion to supply side economics, but there we were.”

He said all this with a straight face and the group of us in the room got more and more agitated. There were tears and heart-wrenching stories of health problems, and of the need to keep our investments in Medicare, Medicaid, and the ACA individual mandate. Mr. Kinzler held the hands of those who were crying, and he looked concerned, but he was cold as ice. When we talked about how the bill would hurt people, Mr. Kinzler seemed baffled. We talked about PAYGO, the well-announced plans to tackle entitlements next, but he kept saying that this bill doesn’t touch health programs and PAYGO won’t be invoked.

As we watched him speak dismissively of the 13 million people at risk of losing their health insurance if this passes, it reminded me of Stalin’s adage: a hundred deaths is a tragedy; a million is politics. To the senator, this was just politics. The oldest moral philosophy in the world is the intellectual justification for greed, said Arthur Schlesinger. We saw it on full display here.

Our next stop was at Senator Collins’s office. Her staff refused to meet the disability activists. Several locked their doors on us. One told us the office is private property. Lindsey Graham ran away from the disability activists. Activists chased a senator from Arkansas to the elevator. Jerry Moran, the junior senator from Kansas, hid from his constituents who’d come all the way from home to meet with him.

There is something wrong when those who represent us refuse to hear us or talk with us. It is a reflection of a broken democracy.

At the Capital Rotunda, we met Ady Barkan, the disability activist with advanced ALS who gained national recognition after he confronted Senators Jeff Flake and Susan Collins over their support for the Republican tax scam. He reminded us that democracy is beautiful. It was up to us to make it work.

The police told us the protest was illegal. At that point, we lay down for a die-in and began to sing “This Land is Your Land” and “This Little Light of Mine” on the floor of the Capital Rotunda. The energy of our frustration was bursting through the air, and manifested in many positive ways. Paul proposed to his fiancé at the action.

Ady, several other disability activists, ACT Uppers, veterans of the Women’s March, and many others joined the action. Some 65 of us were arrested screaming for the democracy to hear us, to kill the bill, to reflect our diversity, and the voices of the majority, who voted for someone else besides Trump. Despite feeling as if democracy was broken, we also felt we were going to fix it, one direct action at a time.

Back in New York, I went to the New York Stock Exchange, where 500 protesters filled the

street chanting, “Kill the Bill. Don’t Kill Us!” More than 60 of us laid down for a die-in.

The die-in, which was organized by unions, community groups and religious organizations, happened at the center of corporate profiteering on the eve of the Congressional vote on the tax bill.

At the time of this writing, half of Americans believed the tax bill would lead to higher - not lower - taxes for themselves and their families. The bill is hugely unpopular with the public, but Republican Congress members are advancing it anyway to mollify their big-money campaign contributors. “My donors are basically saying, ‘Get it done or don’t ever call me again,’” U.S. Rep. Chris Collins, R-Western New York, said recently.

The protesters blocked the main entrance to the Stock Exchange and much of the intersection of Wall and Broad Streets. They held tombstone shaped signs that said “Tax the Rich!” and “Stop Wall Street Theft.” Many also carried giant checks written out to “The Very Rich.” When police warned the crowd to move or face arrest, 15 protestors refused and were arrested. The crowd continued the non-violent demonstration.

“All day, all week, Occupy Wall Street!” we chanted. “Tax the Rich, not the poor!” It felt meaningful to be at Wall Street for the action, where we were taking on the same banks and powers the Occupy Movement took on, trying to challenge the inequalities that this bill would only expand.

After the Stock Exchange action, I ran to my policy class, where my students and I talked about the actions throughout the fall and the assault on social policy. They presented on the Volstead Act, the Clinton Crime Bill, the Clear AIR Act, No Child Left Behind, NY Universal Health Care Act, the ‘Death with Dignity’ bill, and so many more. A subtext of the class was the question about what can be done about the war on the poor, “I pray my 13-year-old son will not find himself in solitary,” confessed our final presenter. We all pray this country can make it



through this period with Dreamers threatened with deportation, record homelessness, mass incarceration, and increasing healthcare costs.

Throughout the actions, solidarity was expanding everywhere. Thank you to Alan Timothy Lunceford-Stevens for all his leadership on this. He was there supporting us action after action in DC, welcoming us out of jail. Note the plastic bag, holding my belongings, I was holding.

The mass civil disobedience

actions in D.C. were some of the most powerful of my lifetime. Throughout the year, we fought back hard. We found new forms of solidarity in the streets and in the struggle, often supporting each other in ways we had seemingly abandoned during the Obama years. Faced with the ascendant right, our solidarity was our solution this year, and it will be next year.

At the end of a long year of protests, my friend Nikki wrote me a note that said, “Thanks Ben for the work you did going down to D.C. and being in the streets. It’s important. It’s inspiring. It reminds me that in the dark times we will be singing. And that doesn’t mean things are okay, it just means that there is a light that can’t be extinguished.”

I met so many great people this year. There is a joy in being with resisters, to being free and with like-minded and jubilant friends. Through each of our actions, we communicate, protest, scream and search for meaning. We tell our stories.

Yet, as the first year of the Trump administration comes to a close, and as I look back on my shared experiences of resistance, it’s necessary to evaluate whether we engaging the total social process. Is there still room for us to improvise, to engage and challenge ways of thinking, protesting, and taking on power? Are our efforts, our actions, up to the task for the challenge we face? Can we do a better job of talking to each other and scaling our actions up to the tasks at hand? Are our stories compelling in ways that bring more people into the conversation?



Our lawyer Kate took this picture of Garrett Wilkinson and I outside the senate offices on Senate office building as we shut down the hearings for the Cassidy Graham ACA repeal bill.

The Affordable Care Act is still in place and the Right Wing in Washington is playing out their

Faustian bargain. They made a kind of deal with the devil that certainly will have an unhappy end; but we're all part of the collateral damage. As we prepare for another year of sustained solidarity, let us allow a thousand flowers to bloom; continue to counter hate speech with acts of love and care; and invite more dialogue, not less. Let's prefigure our idea of a better world and work together to create it.

We pushed back a lot this year.

In the streets, with my comrades, it felt as if democracy might be on the mend. Yet, for it to really mend, we need to combat the ongoing war on the poor.

On the way home from my last trip to DC, I took a five am subway ride from Union Square where the bus dropped us off. It was a cold December night. The train was full homeless people sleeping. The moving cars seemed to be a shelter of last resort. I fear we are entering a new gilded age, with more and more kids unable to afford school, find homes, or insurance. I fear our New York will become Sister Carrie's New York, a place where the poor face more and more challenges than they can endure. Let's all work together to make sure they are not, we are not, no one is left behind to fend for themselves.

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**About the Author:** Benjamin Heim Shepard, Ph.D., is Professor, New York School of Technology/City University of New York ([benshepard@mindspring.com](mailto:benshepard@mindspring.com)).