THE AIDS ERA
1981 – 1993

AIDS BENEFITS AND FAMILY
MARCH ON WASHINGTON
BISEXUAL ACTIVISM
The AIDS Era

PERSONAL STORY
I moved to Los Angeles in early 1985 from Wisconsin; 4 years into the epidemic I did not know a person with HIV or AIDS. Soon, I was thrust into the world of hearing terms on a daily basis, from friends and patients alike, such as “I’ve been diagnosed,” or “He’s got the pneumonia,” and seeing purplish Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions everywhere I went in Los Angeles.
I remember specifically when my sister called to tell me about that Enrique, someone I had dated while living in Wisconsin, had died from AIDS-related complications. It was October of 1985.

She said “They wouldn’t enter his room with the food trays—left them outside even when he couldn’t walk. One day a candy striper was about to go in—Enrique was waving a dollar bill at her through the glass window; he wanted a candy bar. Well, a nurse ran over to the striper, whispered something, and moments later the girl pushed her cart quickly down the hall.”
“Enrique never got to tell his mother he was dying—who knows if he even knew he was dying?” my sister went on. “He phoned his mother to say that he had a bad flu and was going in to the hospital to rest for a few days. He had even promised to come to San Juan to see her for Thanksgiving.”

I remembered that last phone call Enrique and I had exchanged the previous December, just before I had moved. He had asked me if I thought all the diarrhea and weight loss he was experiencing could be due to “that new awful AIDS I’ve been hearing about.”
“Come on, Enrique. I’m sure it’ll pass. You’re fine, just a bug or something. I’ll call you in a few weeks after I’m settled.”

I never did. And now I never could. And now I was left to wonder if I, too, was infected.

– Dr. Mark Katz

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Although the term LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) has been used throughout the text, it is not a term people used in the 1980s. Queer remained a derogatory term, although the term had started to be reclaimed by the LGBTQ community by the end of the decade. The rise of GLB or LGB acronyms at the end of this era signaled bisexuals as an increasing part of the gay and lesbian coalition. Transgender activism was not prominent in the 1980s and transgender people still struggled for acceptance within the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities. Transgender activism would not emerge as a force and enter into broader coalition until later in the 1990s.
THE FIRST CASES OF WHAT would later be termed Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) were reported in 1981 when young men in three major United States cities were hospitalized with cases of extremely rare, deadly opportunistic infections. Within fifteen years, AIDS would become the leading cause of death for Americans aged 25-44.

Now it is known that the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the virus that causes AIDS, is a blood-borne, sexually transmitted disease that cannot be acquired via casual contact. But in the early 1980s, all anyone knew was that this new illness was fatal. The ambiguity was a recipe for panic and blame.

Because the first reported cases of disease were among gay men, public opinion pigeonholed the burgeoning epidemic as a “gay plague.” The stigma of homosexuality remained strong in the 1980s, a decade which began with no federal or statewide anti-discrimination laws in place to protect the civil rights of LGBTQ people. This prejudice seemed to be a primary cause of the relative inaction of the federal government to address the epidemic. From June 1981 to June 1982, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) spent $1 million on AIDS, which by October 1982, had stricken 634 Americans and killed 260. Across the same time frame, the CDC spent $9 million on Legionnaires’

A NOVELIST AND ACADEMY AWARD-NOMINATED screenwriter, Larry Kramer saw early on that AIDS would devastate the gay male population. He cofounded one of the first organizations to confront the epidemic, Gay Men’s Health Crisis, and five years later helped form the more combative collective, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). Kramer realized that protesting against drug companies had to be made visually interesting in order to garner the media coverage ACT UP sought as leverage for policy change. ACT UP’s theatrical protests and arresting graphics provided the gay community a voice in determining how to treat a disease which overwhelmingly affected themselves. Kramer went on to write a prize-winning Broadway play about the early days of AIDS, The Normal Heart.
By 1985, media rhetoric concerning those with AIDS highlighted the "innocent victims" of the disease, meaning babies born ill or hemophiliacs infected via blood transfusion. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) formed partly to combat the widespread notion that gay men with HIV were, conversely, somehow to blame for their own deaths. They compiled instances of homophobic statements and depictions in media portrayals, news reports, and political rhetoric. Readers of GLAAD’s newsletter were given addresses of producers, publishers, and politicians responsible for bigoted language or portrayals, and were encouraged to make their voice heard. This picture shows a GLAAD protest at a movie studio in Los Angeles.

disease, which had caused fewer than 50 deaths. Even more troubling, because of the long incubation period, it was estimated that a quarter of a million Americans were infected by the time of the first deaths.

Some gay men reacted to the sudden appearance of AIDS in the community with denial. Scant public health warnings and virtually absent media attention gave rise to theories that the new disease didn’t actually exist or couldn’t be spread by sexual contact. The early inability of scientists to find the cause of the disease contributed to the confusion. Doctors and activists who spoke of a coming cataclysm were distrusted and dismissed for exaggerating the threat. Many gay men felt that authorities were trying to put them back in the closet and reverse the hard-won battles for acceptance and visibility.

This perception was heightened by homophobic rhetoric from religious and government leaders in the early years of the epidemic. Future White House Communications Director Pat Buchanan wrote: “The poor homosexuals -- they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is extracting an awful retribution.” Moral Majority leader Reverend Jerry Falwell said: “AIDS is not just God’s punishment for
URVASHI VAID WAS HIRED OUT OF LAW SCHOOL by the American Civil Liberties Union, where as part of the National Prisons Project, she worked for the rights of prisoners who were HIV-positive. In 1986, she joined the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) and served for three years as the public information director. In 1989, she became NGLTF’s executive director, the first person of color to head a mainstream national LGBTQ civil rights organization. She briefly retired to write the award winning Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation, before returning to the NGLTF as their public information director. As of 2013, Vaid served as the Deputy Director of the Governance and Civil Society Unit of the Peace and Social Justice Program of the Ford Foundation.

Public opinion tended to blame those with AIDS for the disease. Hemophiliac children infected through blood transfusions were forced to leave school. A backlash of fear intensified after movie star Rock Hudson, one of the first public figures to confirm his diagnosis, died from homosexuality; it is God’s punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.” The New York Times published conservative leader William F. Buckley’s call for people with AIDS to be tattooed for identification purposes.

The graph shows the precipitous increase in AIDS-related deaths in the United States in the first fifteen years of the crisis. Subsequent improvements in medication and treatments have increasingly allowed those infected with HIV to stave off the onset of AIDS and AIDS-related death.
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AFTER THREE YEARS AS A NUN, Virginia Apuzzo decided to pursue her political interests. She argued for a gay rights plank in the 1976 Democratic National Committee platform and joined the Women’s Caucus of the National Gay Task Force (NGTF). In 1982, she became Executive Director of NGTF and directed the organization to push for a federal response to AIDS. In 1985, she joined New York Governor Mario Cuomo’s administration, where she worked on the Consumer Protection Board to challenge pharmaceutical companies over pricing of AIDS drugs and to change discriminatory policies in the insurance industry. Once arrested outside the White House as a protester against the Reagan administration’s lack of response to AIDS, she became the highest-ranking openly LGBTQ person in the Clinton Administration where she secured fast-track disability benefits for those with the disease. “For a long time gays’ objective was to get government off our backs. With the advent of AIDS it became very clear that there were some problems the government had to be involved in,”

complications of AIDS in 1985. Life magazine screamed on its cover, “Now no one is safe from AIDS.” Violence against gay men rose precipitously.

In 1986, right-wing political activist Lyndon LaRouche crafted California Proposition 64, which would give the state the power to quarantine those with HIV. The initiative collected near 700,000 signatures, twice the number needed to put the measure on the ballot. LGBTQ activists feared that if they lost, similar initiatives would spread across the United States. Through increasingly sophisticated political organizing, fundraising, and grassroots operations, LGBTQ activists were able to deliver an overwhelming defeat of the measure at the polls.

Scientists at the CDC and other institutions in the United States and France eventually determined that the retrovirus HIV caused a breakdown of the body’s immune system. A test for the virus became available in 1985. With confirmation that the disease could be spread by sex, the gay community—the hardest hit, but by no means the only population at risk—reorganized to meet the crisis.

Groups such as Gay Men’s Health Crisis, Project Inform, AIDS Project Los Angeles, and the American Foundation for AIDS Research, formed to fill the void of effective public health policy by raising money for research and education, and to support those with the disease. However, the mounting
The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) formed in New York City in 1987 under the motto: “United in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis.” Symbolized by a pink triangle and the slogan “SILENCE=DEATH,” the group operated through a radical democratic decision-by-consensus style. They became known for their disruptive protests, theatrical street demonstrations, and willingness to be arrested for their cause. At their height, they boasted thousands of members in chapters across the United States and spawned such groups as the artists collective Gran Fury, the militant Queer Nation, and the Treatment Action Group (TAG). TAG’s medical expertise worked alongside ACT UP’s activism to reform the drug trial policies and speed the development of new drugs in the Food and Drug Administration. Their work changed the way this and future epidemics were to be handled by governmental and corporate entities. By 1996, advances in antiviral therapies allowed HIV/AIDS to be largely managed and transformed it from the death sentence that it had been for the previous fifteen years.
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The death toll and sheer scale of the epidemic overwhelmed the meager resources of grassroots organizations. The federal government needed to become involved. Coming out in support of increased funding for AIDS research meant personal visibility and vulnerability in a society in which one could be legally fired or evicted for being LGBTQ. But a life-and-death desperation in the gay community drove increasing numbers to take the risk.

Isolated acts of protest in 1985 and 1986, and increasingly combative reports in gay publications, indicated the mounting anger in the gay community. In early 1987, the Center for Disease Control convened a conference about the question of routine AIDS testing of certain populations. A protest group calling itself the Lavender Hill Mob stormed the proceedings and shouted down the speakers, pleading for the scientific community to “test drugs, not people.” The Mob dressed distinctively – they wore the pink triangle insignia forced upon gay men in Nazi concentration camps. Avram Finkelstein’s Silence=Death collective spread posters throughout New York City to foment expanded gay activism.

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) formed in 1987 and quickly became the face of the new activism. A primary target of the group was the availability of medications. Drugs identified as promising for AIDS treatment had not been fast-tracked for testing by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The sole drug available was a failed cancer drug that cost thousands of dollars a year,
and clinical trial protocols denied patients potential alternatives. Using civil disobedience, direct-action tactics, and media visibility, ACT UP put pressure on the FDA to expedite their work.

The federal government response was slow. By 1987, when President Reagan gave his first policy speech about AIDS, nearly forty thousand Americans had been diagnosed with the disease and over twenty thousand had died. That same year, Congress adopted an amendment banning funds for any AIDS education materials that “promote or encourage, directly or indirectly, homosexual activities.” This effectively outlawed any federally-funded education efforts which mentioned homosexual acts that could spread the virus. At the same time, other nations such as the United Kingdom, Uganda, and Thailand undertook massive educational programs that served as models of HIV prevention.

Reagan’s Commission on AIDS eventually released a report urging the protection of those with HIV against discrimination, an expansion of funding and services to fight AIDS, and money for preventive education. These recommendations were allowed to languish. Congress responded in 1988 by approving legislation that would define a comprehensive federal program to fight and treat AIDS. In 1990, the death of a teenager with hemophilia prompted the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resource Emergency (CARE) Act, which funded community-based care and treatment services. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was the first federal law to offer some protection against discrimination for those with HIV.

AN EMMY- AND PEABODY-AWARD-WINNING documentarian, Marlon Riggs, created films that confronted issues of racism and homophobia. His 1989 documentary, Tongues Untied, examined black gay male sexuality, particularly the differences between conceptions of macho and sissy within the black community. Other films include the 1987 documentary Ethnic Notions on racial stereotyping; Color Adjustment: Blacks in Prime Time (1991) about the stereotypical portrayal of black people on television; No Regrets (1993) about five HIV-positive black men addressing the stigma of HIV/AIDS and homosexuality in the black community; and Black Is...Black Ain’t (released posthumously in 1995) regarding the diversity of black identities.
OFTEN DISCUSSED SOLELY IN terms of gay men, AIDS had an impact on lesbians as well. Previously, lesbian and gay people had existed more as side-by-side entities than as one community. The epidemic brought the two together as lesbians cared and fought for ailing gay men.

The influx of AIDS patients to hospitals made acute many of the iniquities faced by same-sex couples. Because same-sex relationships were not legally recognized, hospitals could deny a gay man visitation rights, or say over the health needs of his life-partner dying of AIDS. Upon the death of a partner, the surviving person was also denied the rights and benefits accorded married couples. In 1986, a New York City gay man, Miguel Braschi, was threatened eviction when his partner died of AIDS-related complications. The case was ultimately decided in favor of Braschi. It was the first United States court decision to give any legal protection to same-sex couples.

In 1982, The Village Voice newspaper in New York became the first corporate entity to provide health and other benefits to unmarried partners of employees, and in 1984, the city of Berkeley was the first to offer domestic partnership benefits for public employees. However, these small steps...
In 1979, Sharon Kowalski and Karen Thompson (pictured above) fell in love and bought a house together. Because there was no legal way for the couple to marry, they named one another as policy beneficiaries to indicate their mutual commitment. Four years later, Kowalski was hit by a drunk driver and rendered incapacitated. Kowalski’s father, who refused to acknowledge the relationship between his daughter and her partner, was given guardianship rights. Thompson was prevented from caring for her, and even from seeing her, for several years. It took nearly a decade plus a court appeal before Thompson was declared Kowalski’s legal guardian.

 underscored the vulnerability of the vast majority of committed gay and lesbian couples in this era. Same-sex couples continued to be denied benefits, non-citizens deported over the wishes of their same-sex partner, and children removed from the homes of gay and lesbian parents. Anti-sodomy laws, which were upheld by the 1986 United States Supreme Court decision *Bowers v. Hardwick*, continued to make presumptive criminals of gay and lesbian people and to make an argument against providing them benefits and rights.

**MARCH ON WASHINGTON**

By 1987, the LGBTQ community was angry. The *Bowers v. Hardwick* Supreme Court decision had upheld statutes criminalizing private sexual relations between same-sex partners, and the Reagan Administration’s newly formed Commission on AIDS was in serious disarray (its chair and vice-chair resigned within months). In response, a steering committee recruited from LGBTQ organizations nationwide proposed a March on Washington to articulate such demands as the legal recognition of lesbian and
The day before the march, Reverend Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Church, performed a mass commitment ceremony for thousands of same-sex couples. At dawn on the day of the march, the NAMES Project Foundation AIDS Memorial Quilt was unveiled for the first time. Two days after the march, several hundred demonstrators were arrested outside the Supreme Court while protesting the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision.

The march had a profound impact on the hundreds of thousands that attended and helped mobilize grassroots organizing across the country. Major national entities that emerged from the march included BiNet USA and the National Latino/a Gay and Lesbian Organization. Robert Eichberg and Jean O’Leary founded National Coming Out Day in 1988, which is held every year on October 11, the anniversary of the march. However, because media outlets largely did not cover LGBTQ events or activism, most of the country never heard about one of the largest civil rights marches in United States history or the deeply moving memorial quilt.

**LOU SULLIVAN 1951 – 1991**

**BORN SHEILA JEAN SULLIVAN,** Lou Sullivan joined the Gay People’s Union (GPU) at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee and soon began writing for the GPU paper on transgender issues. He sought sex reassignment surgery at Stanford University’s gender dysphoria program, but was rejected due to the restrictive policies of the era in treating gay-identified individuals. Privatization of the industry and a subsequent loosening of restrictions allowed him to successfully transition in 1980 and begin living full-time as a man. While working at the Janis Information Facility, a transgender referral and information center, he wrote *Information for the Female-to-Male Cross Dresser and Transsexual,* which became standard reading for the female-to-male (FTM) transgender community. In 1986, he started the first FTM-only support group and newsletter. As of 2014, FTM International is the longest-running and largest FTM organization in the world.
In the mid-1980s, activist Cleve Jones and fellow demonstrators plastered a wall with placards showing names of San Franciscans who had died of AIDS. To Jones, the effect resembled a quilt. Within two years, he and others had formed the NAMES Project Foundation. The object was to express private grief through traditional craft in a publicly displayed and mobile memorial. The panels allowed individuals, families, and organizations to commemorate a partner, friend, or co-worker whose life was cut short by AIDS.

Shown for the first time in 1987 at the Second National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, it contained over nineteen hundred panels. The names commemorated in the panels were read in a ceremony that lasted hours. After the march, it was taken on a four-month tour, during which more panels were added, tripling its size. As of 2020, the quilt includes over 50,000 panels commemorating over 105,000 people who died from AIDS-related causes. The project was the subject of the Academy Award-winning 1989 documentary Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt.
IN THE 1980S, BISEXUAL WOMEN formed their own groups to more closely align with feminist principles. Founded in 1983, the Boston Bisexual Women’s Network was one of the earliest of these groups. Also in the 1980s, the East Coast Bisexual Network, Bay Area Bisexual Network, and New York Area Bisexual Network—as well as political organizations such as San Francisco’s BiPOL, Boston’s BiCEP, and New York City’s BiPAC—formed demonstrating a broader coalition and reach of bisexual activists.

In conjunction with the 1984 Democratic Convention, BiPOL organized the first rally for bisexual rights. In 1990, the North American Bisexual Network (later called BiNet) formed as the first national organization, and in 1990, BiPOL organized the first U.S. National Bisexual Conference in San Francisco. The second national conference came about in conjunction with the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation; the first national march to include bisexuals in the title.

Bisexual visibility, and integration in the LGBTQ movement, continued to grow in the years to follow. Connecticut State Representative Evelyn Mantilla came out in 1997 to become the first openly bisexual elected politician. In 1999, Celebrate Bisexuality Day launched and became an annual celebration on September 23 to celebrate bisexual identity.
Gilbert Baker is credited for designing the first gay pride flag. The original had eight stripes of color and first flew at San Francisco's pride parade in 1978.

The bisexual flag is credited to a team led by Michael Page. It was influenced by the Biangels symbol and was first flown at the BiCafe in 1998.

Many flags have been raised to represent the transgender community, but this one by Monica Helms, first flown at the 2000 Phoenix pride parade, is probably the most common.