



Fighting AIDS Is More Than A Fashion Statement

by Arawn Eibhlyn
drawings by Terry Forman

This article is dedicated to Terry Sutton—my friend, confidante, and inspiration for much of what is included here, though he wouldn't agree with everything I've said—he never did! Terry died on April 11, 1989, murdered by government red tape and corporate greed.

You can bury your feelings,
you can bury your head,
with a handful of dirt
you can bury the dead.
You can lower your eyes,
and with hands over ears
you can deafen the cries...
You can bury the truth
'cause you've done your share,
But it's just not enough
to merely show that you care.
Not a soul will get any rest
till we've done more than our best...

"ACT UP"

for Terry Sutton

— words and music by Jo Carol

ON OCTOBER 11, 1988, I WAS ONE OF 1,500 MEN AND WOMEN from around the country who shut down the routine functioning of the Food and Drug Administration headquarters in Rockville, Maryland. It was the most audacious action to date of a movement that was only one year old. News coverage of people with HIV infection willing to fight in order to live in the face of the AIDS pandemic reached around the world. That day we chanted, "42,000 dead from AIDS! Where was George?" Patrick Grace. Dan Snow. David Bell. Don Wright. Terry Sutton. These men were my friends. All were arrested that day in Rockville. All are now dead.

I've been to a lot of demonstrations since then. In January, 1989, about 100 AIDS activists tied up morning rush hour traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge for nearly an hour to drive home the point that AIDS should be everyone's concern. In June, 300 of us took over the opening ceremonies of the V International Conference on AIDS in Montreal, demanding that the scientific community recognize the importance of the role people with HIV infection are playing in combating AIDS. In October, 1989, thousands demonstrated in 20 cities across the U.S. to demand a federally coordinated emergency

program to end the epidemic, and to protest the Bush administration's assertion that it's "pound foolish" to put money into AIDS treatment access. A year later, the number of lives taken by AIDS in the U.S. alone stood at more than 65,000—23,000 lives in twelve months.

If they had been shot down in a military skirmish over unknown territory, Reagan or Bush would have spoken eloquent words over flag-draped coffins, flags would have flown at half mast, and the cry for retaliation would have been deafening. Instead, they were shot down by government inaction, public apathy, ridicule, blame and hate. The only sabers rattling are those



of right-wing bigots such as Jesse Helms and William Dannemeyer. And the growing AIDS activist movement has developed more quickly than anyone could have predicted even two years ago.

We have no choice. If we don't fight, more people will die.

NO TURNING BACK

In the face of death, we have become more proud—strengthened in our resolve. There is nothing we cannot overcome.

— the Truth Fairy (from a flyer circulated in San Francisco's Castro District)

Is the lesbian and gay community too focused on AIDS? Have we become, as some say, so fixated on "the drama of catastrophe" that we're

* See Darryl Yates Rist, "AIDS As Apocalypse: The Deadly Costs of an Obsession," *The Nation*, February 13, 1989.

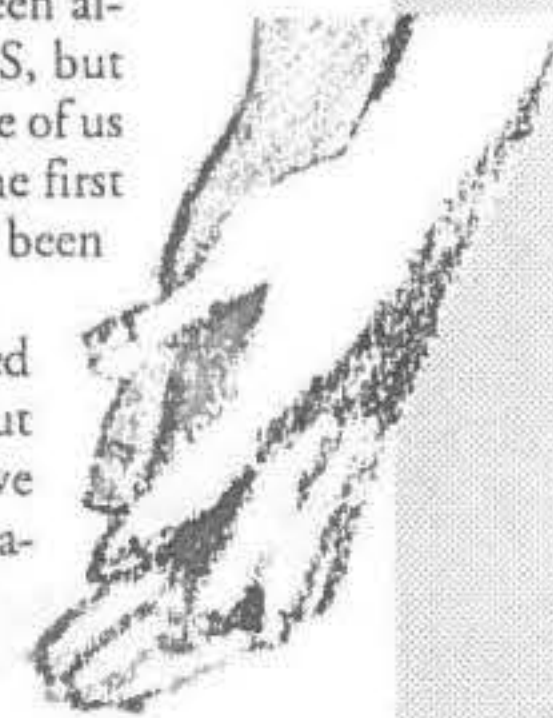
abandoning the struggle for lesbian and gay liberation? There's a lot of discussion these days about such questions.

Faced with a government policy that can only be described as negligent at best, and genocidal at worst, we've been forced to invest incredible amounts of time and money just to survive. Have we, in the process, ignored the importance of ending anti-lesbian/gay violence? Or the needs of gay youth driven onto the streets by families, friends—a society—they can't fit into? Where are the energy and resources in a male-dominated community to fight lesbian oppression? To continue the battle for basic civil and human rights? These are important questions and they have to be addressed.

It's true our movement has focused on AIDS. But those who condemn people with HIV infection, their caregivers and AIDS activists for failing to address the breadth of lesbian and gay issues are looking at the world through the wrong end of a telescope. On the contrary, these very people, through our battle to end the AIDS epidemic, are playing a critical role in revitalizing the movement for lesbian and gay liberation. To say the AIDS movement is holding back our struggle is to lose sight of the victories we've won, the growth we're undergoing.

The struggle to defeat AIDS is undeniably about our liberation. We experience AIDS as both a great personal loss and as an attack on our community's right to exist. Thousands of gay men have been allowed to die—not just because we have AIDS, but because we're expendable in this society. None of us doubts that if straight white men had been the first to contract AIDS, much more would have been done to end the epidemic.

It may be that AIDS will eventually be cured or at least controlled by medical science. But AIDS is not a purely medical issue. If it were, we wouldn't face mandatory testing, discrimination based on antibody status, or soaring anti-gay violence. We wouldn't have to blockade federal buildings, zap government officials, or smuggle treatments across the border. We were hated for being queer before AIDS ever entered



the picture. AIDS has only intensified the hatred, and heightened our understanding of where we stand.

The right wing—all the way from the pulpit to the White House—hoped that AIDS would sound the death knell for lesbian and gay liberation. Defeating the advancing “gay menace” has always been important to reclaiming America from perceived decadence and decay and returning it to traditional Christian values. AIDS handed the right wing a new round of ammunition. Dubbed “GRID” (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) by the scientific community in the early days of the epidemic, AIDS was quickly popularized as the “Gay Plague,” and a moral panic set in that blamed all gay people for its spread.

Let's face it—a lot of people rejoiced at the thought of queers dropping like flies. And the old axiom to “make hay while the sun shines” certainly applied to the vermin that crawled onto the political platform to rail against the “...filth, disease and degradation which is to be found in the ‘gay lifestyle’ of the typical AIDS victim.”



Homo-hating found new justification and the number of anti-gay attacks began to soar. According to the Violence Project of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the percentage of anti-gay attacks motivated by fear of AIDS rose nationally from eight percent in 1985 to 17 percent in 1988. Other groups, such as the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, cite statistics closer to 30 percent.

In another measure of the impact of AIDS on popular attitudes towards gay people, support within the general public for even the most basic civil rights dropped dramatically between 1982 and 1987, when fear of contracting AIDS hit its highest point. Between 1977 and 1982, public support for gay civil rights rose modestly. In 1982, approximately 45 percent of those surveyed said homosexual relations between consenting adults should be legal. By 1987, that figure had dropped to 33 percent. John Adams Wettergreen summed it up succinctly: “The problem of AIDS can be solved instantly and efficiently by restricting homosexuality, not by granting it rights.”

But more significantly, our hard-won right as lesbians and gay men to define our own lives threatened, once again, to slip away from us. This assertion of our right to define ourselves, after all, was responsible for the many positive changes our movement fought for. It is at the very heart of what it means to be liberated.

In the days before Stonewall, lesbians and gay men had virtually no power to define what our lives were like. The world saw us—and we saw ourselves—through the grotesque images created by the church, the criminal justice system and the medical profession. To the righteous, we were immoral, an abomination in the eyes of god. They drove us from the churches. To the lawmakers and enforcers, we were criminals. They locked us up after brutal raids on our clubs and other meeting places, and published our names in local papers for all to know our “crime.” And to those with the power to judge sanity, we were sick. They incarcerated us in mental asylums, or “cured” us with aversion therapy and electric shock.

Nothing was the same after the Stonewall riot. It was the spark that ignited decades of pent-up rage and frustration. It awakened us to the possibility that we could fight back. And in the process of building a movement, we talked about our lives, developed an understanding of our oppression, and took action to seize control of our own destiny, with the goal

* John Adams Wettergreen, “AIDS, Public Morality and Public Health,” *Claremont Review of Books*, Fall 1985.

of transforming not only ourselves, but all of society. It was a time of great energy, of seemingly unlimited possibilities.

The activism of the post-Stonewall movement mobilized more lesbians and gay men than ever before in history. The cry to “Come Out” became an act of personal and political liberation. Lesbians and gay men proclaimed “Gay is Good,” challenging society as well as the self-hatred we had internalized growing up in a virulently anti-gay society.

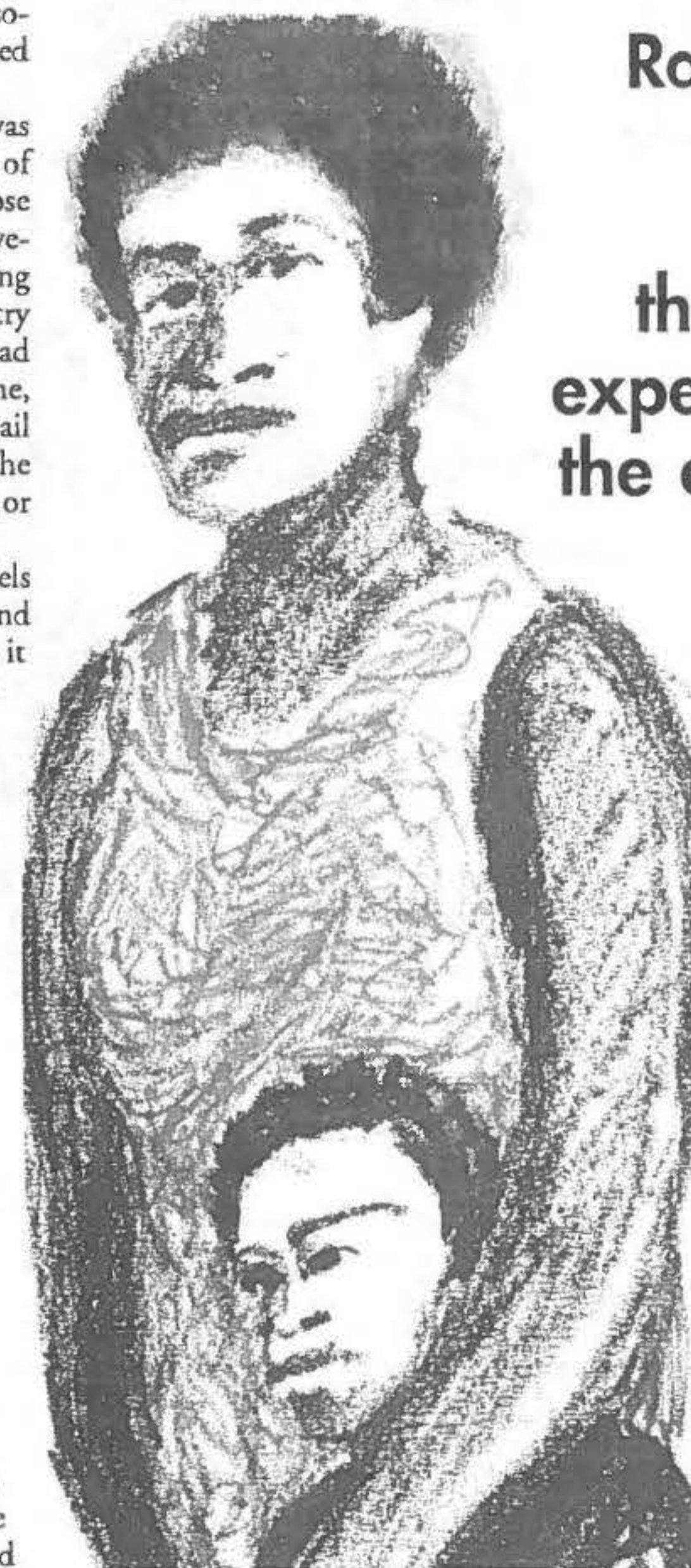
When I came out in 1972 at the age of 21, it was a liberating experience. It followed too many years of denial, depression and self-hate. I came out in those heady days of gay liberation. The women's movement was at its height. Black Power was challenging the racist foundations of U.S. policy in this country and around the world. And the war in Vietnam had not yet ended. I had my ear pierced (the right one, of course), wore my hair long, and wore finger nail polish and eye shadow to my bookstore job in the local mall. And, mind you, this was not New York or San Francisco—it was Lexington, Kentucky.

I didn't want to be like any of the male role models in my life. I wanted to be quite different, in fact. And I guess I was. Androgyny was fashionable, and it shaped my consciousness—my experience. My makeup was a weapon to wage war on straight society; and from the looks on most of the faces in the bookstore, I'd say it definitely had an impact. If people didn't like it, well, I didn't care—that was their problem. Like thousands of other gay men, I rejected the roles society defined for us. Androgyny was a political statement—the outward expression of our commitment to ending sex and gender roles as cornerstones of our oppression. We defined who we were. And we saw our own liberation as part of the larger struggles for change sweeping the U.S. My favorite political button from that period (and I still wear it every Lesbian/Gay Pride Day) is bright pink and says “Freaking Fag Revolutionary.” Fitting in was definitely not on our minds.

As we moved into the late 70s, the lesbian and gay movement built institutions to defend our communities against violence, to push for civil rights protections and to strike down repressive laws. The Castro and Greenwich Village were booming gay enclaves with thriving businesses and an openness we'd only dreamed of. We had newfound confidence and a sense of our own power to affect change. If we were not yet accepted, we were at least creating more space to find out who we were. We were attempting to create an identity for lesbians and gay men that fit us better. One based on our own experience, our own needs and desires.

But during that same period, lesbian/gay politics shifted from a struggle for liberation to the pursuit of

civil rights. We didn't talk too much anymore about taking pride in being defiantly different and demanding that society accept us as we were—drag queens, bull dykes and all. More and more, we argued that we weren't really all that different after all. That we were just like everyone else—we held jobs,



Racism has shaped much of the world's experience of the epidemic.

we had children, we voted. Women wore dresses and men wore suits. Our tactics changed to accomplish these new goals. While we never abandoned the streets completely, visible gay leaders were more likely to be seen testifying before government hearings or lobbying on Capitol Hill. And we made many important gains during that time.

But AIDS has made us re-examine just how far



we've come. By turning toward a more legalistic focus, have we merely exchanged the stodgy gray-suited straight politician for one with a better fashion sense? Have we handed over control of our lives to a select few gay politicians willing to play by the rules of a political system that generally despises us?

As we look around at society's response to AIDS, we see the same tired trinity we've been fighting all along. Only now they have death and contagion on their side. Their reaction to the AIDS epidemic has rested on a fundamental hatred of our lives. How else are we to understand the callous disregard for the tens of thousands of gay men who've died? Aren't the appeals for abstinence based on the belief that our sexuality is "unnatural"? That, really, we shouldn't be sexual under any circumstances? Even more insulting, our detractors have tried to get us to go along with their condemnation of our lives.

But, in the face of these renewed attacks on our

lives, we've refused to go back. We've fought to define our sexuality as a positive aspect of our lives—to affirm our right to be intimate, loving people. We've taken care of each other. We've developed stronger, more supportive relationships.

These changes may seem insignificant at first glance, but they are strengthening us. We've learned to survive. In some deeper sense, our self-image is changing—we're not weak. It's just as the Truth Fairy said: If we can survive AIDS, we can survive anything.

ACT UP, FIGHT BACK, FIGHT AIDS!

ACT UP...join the fight
Do something strong
to show them what's right
ACT UP...give 'em a fight
and thru the darkness
we'll be the light
—“ACT UP”

Strengthening our sense of community, of our right to exist, has been an important weapon in our battle against AIDS. Resistance—confrontation with an uncaring and unresponsive government—is another. On October 11, 1987, one year before the FDA action, 750,000 lesbians and gay men marched in Washington, D.C. Two days later, nearly 5,000 of us went to the Supreme Court for the largest act of civil disobedience in the history of the lesbian and gay struggle. Eight hundred and forty were arrested protesting the Court's upholding of a Georgia anti-sodomy law that effectively maintains our illegal status.

The Supreme Court action was our answer to those who hoped we'd all die off or at least be pushed back into the closet. In the face of mounting anti-gay hysteria and overwhelming sorrow, we celebrated our existence and screamed a defiant “For Love and For Life, We're Not Going Back.” That October was a turning point and we all felt it—it forecast a new militancy and determination for our movement.

For someone who came out just after the Stonewall rebellion, the vitality of today's AIDS movement holds the promise of reclaiming the radical impulse of those earlier days. This isn't about an aging queen taking a trip down memory lane—it's about developing, once again, the radical critique of society necessary to transform gay oppression into gay liberation. The AIDS movement is a training ground for a new generation of lesbian and gay activists. They are infusing the movement with new energy and new experience. As those of us who par-

ticipated in the early movement bring our understandings and experiences from the days of GLF (Gay Liberation Front) and GAA (Gay Activists Alliance), we are being challenged to step out of the 60s and 70s to understand that lesbian and gay lives today are different from the Stonewall era in which we came out. This union is strengthening us all. Many questions which had been put on the back burner throughout the 70s are now being discussed again. We are looking at our history, evaluating our successes and failures, plotting a new course.

People with AIDS (PWAs) are playing an instrumental role in this process. Faced with a society that views us as guilty victims just waiting to die, PWAs have fought with doctors, right-wing bigots and government officials. We've taken control of our own lives. We've smuggled drugs into the country; we've set up our own drug trials; we've developed networks for support and information sharing; we've gone to jail. People with AIDS are a source of great inspiration to the larger lesbian and gay community, an example of how not to be a victim, but instead to fight and win.

The shift to activism is an important step for us. As we've watched the death toll spiral upward, it has become clear that we must take matters into our own hands. While we continue to press the government for a responsible and humane AIDS policy, we have few illusions that this will happen without a strong movement in the streets which makes the price of neglect higher than the price of change. To succeed, we need to mobilize as many lesbians and gay men into action as possible.

WE'RE HERE! WE'RE QUEER!

While AIDS activism is renewing the need lesbians and gay men feel to fight for our liberation, we've been uncomfortable linking the two issues. In October 1987, ACT NOW (the national AIDS Coalition to Network, Organize and Win) adopted the AIDS Action Pledge as its unifying document without even mentioning lesbians and gay men. This distancing has been partly a rejection of the scapegoating of all lesbians and gay men for the spread of AIDS. After all, we still feel the sting of the earliest AIDS joke to enter American folklore: “Do you know what Gay means? Got AIDS Yet?” Our reluctance has also been based on the recognition that AIDS has had a devastating impact among people of color, injection drug users (IDUs) and, increasingly, adolescents—gay and straight alike. While much of this latter response has been guided by a desire for inclusiveness in our work, there has also been an element of trying to shift blame.

However, the fact remains that the AIDS activist movement is overwhelmingly a movement of lesbians and gay men. Instead of seeing this as a limita-

tion, we should take it as an opportunity to raise our own issues within the context of fighting an epidemic that affects many different communities.

We can and should continue to focus our energies on fighting AIDS. But if we develop a politics of AIDS that places it firmly in the context of our continued oppression as lesbians and gay men, we will succeed in building a stronger movement that speaks more fully to the needs of our diverse community: providing much-needed support services to gay youth; continuing our demands for gay rights; combatting queer bashing; and addressing the problems of racism and sexism, to name a few.

LESBIANS IN THE AIDS MOVEMENT

Historically, the lesbian and gay men's communities have been divided by serious differences—in fact, it's been a long time since there was anything that looked even vaguely like a united lesbian and gay movement. The AIDS epidemic has opened up a new dialogue between lesbians and gay men. We're working together for the first time in many years. Yet lesbians who have contributed so much in the fight against AIDS are viewed with suspicion by men who dominate the movement. Women have had to fight tooth and nail to be seen as anything more than junior partners. Men “tolerate” women in the movement (who are mostly lesbians) so long as they limit their involvement to “women's issues” and accept that it's the men who know best because, after all, we're the ones dying.

Yet, ironically, it was the feminist critique of health care, developed by the women's and lesbian movements in the early 70s, which laid the very foundation for our own response to AIDS. And lesbians have been there since the beginning. Our failure to acknowledge this debt is a reflection of the sexism within the AIDS movement, and our work suffers because of it.

As lesbian AIDS activists have stated many times, they participate in the AIDS movement not only out of solidarity with gay men, but because they understand that the anti-gay response to AIDS has a profound effect on their lives as lesbians. But lesbians have their own issues as well. Many of them—an adversary relationship to the health care system, the threat of violence—are similar to issues faced by gay men. But lesbians' experience of these issues is fundamentally altered by the fact that, as women, their position in society is, most often, one of domination by men. All too often, this includes gay men. Gay men need to work at understanding the power relationships between men and women, and how they play out both in terms of the interpersonal dynamics within the AIDS movement and the issues we choose to raise in our work.

For example, there has been a struggle in the

AIDS activist movement over whether or not to support women's fight for abortion rights. Some men argue that we should stick only to issues directly related to AIDS. But, again, this ignores the social/political aspect of the epidemic. It's no coincidence that many of the same groups most actively opposing the AIDS movement, such as the Traditional Values Coalition, also oppose women's reproductive rights. A society that continues to assert its right to control the lives and bodies of women is not a society that will ever value lesbian and gay lives, AIDS or no AIDS.

Lesbian and gay liberation at its best has understood that such institutions as the heterosexual nuclear family and the church, not often noted as safe havens for queers, are very firmly rooted in the oppression of women. Examining the relationship between male supremacy and compulsory heterosexuality, expanding the list of issues that we consider "ours," will help us to build a broader and more effective movement, one that can pose a deeper challenge to anti-gay social structures than we are capable of posing today.

THE GLOBAL EPIDEMIC

The AIDS activist movement in the U.S. has never successfully addressed the international impact of AIDS. We've argued that AIDS is not a "gay disease" primarily as a defense against the equation "Gay=Disease=Death"—not to help develop a truly global response. We have little understanding of the impact of AIDS outside the white gay male community—whether among women, in Third World communities in the U.S., in Africa, in Asia, or in Latin America. This has given our work a narrow focus. In some cases, it has taken on racist overtones. At the V International Conference on AIDS in Montreal in June 1989, some AIDS activists booed and hissed when Dame Nita Barrow, Barbados' delegate to the United Nations, characterized AIDS as 100 percent fatal in her country. AIDS activists have made important struggles to view people with AIDS as productive people *living* with the disease—not as dying "victims." Yet for many throughout the world, AIDS is indeed 100 percent fatal. The response of some activists to Barrow's comments points to the need to deepen our understanding of the differing impact of AIDS where it intersects with the realities of race, sex and class.

According to the World Health Organization, internationally AIDS has taken the lives of 300,000 men, women and children. When we look at AIDS from this perspective, it has been people of color (whether in Uganda or the South Bronx, Mexico or East L.A., Manila or Manilatown) who have been hardest hit. In the U.S., this reality has been obscured by the early focus on the spread of AIDS

among white gay men.

While anti-gayness has shaped our understanding of AIDS, it is racism that has shaped much of the world's experience of the epidemic. At a national meeting of AIDS activists last year, one gay man argued that a discussion of racism and sexism denied the reality that AIDS crossed all boundaries between these communities and, therefore, made the discussion obsolete. While we may be faced with one "disease," we are experiencing several different epidemics. The impact of the epidemic on different communities and in different countries is not monolithic.

Medical science, concentrated in Western industrialized nations, has largely ignored people with AIDS throughout the Third World—except as research subjects who can be exploited with fewer "ethical" restrictions than those placed on research at home. Pharmaceutical companies, looking more to their profit margin than to saving human lives, focus on developing high-tech drugs that will reap mega-bucks. For those of us who can pay \$3,000 to \$6,000 per year for AZT, even our deaths can be profitable. But Burroughs Wellcome has said that AZT will never be made available in Africa, because those who need it cannot pay the price. In light of the devastating impact AIDS is having throughout Africa and in Third World communities in the U.S., such a callous disregard for human life is genocidal—an understanding we've embraced when we talk about AIDS in our own community, but haven't projected beyond.

The AIDS activist movement in the U.S. is just beginning to address these issues. Our understandings of the epidemic and the tasks we need to undertake have been challenged by people of color working within the movement and by groups based in Third World communities. The challenge ahead will be to fully integrate the global reality of AIDS into our day-to-day work. It won't be enough to hold an occasional forum. We need to develop all of our work in ways that educate our community on every aspect of the epidemic. Developing a truly international focus for our work will in no way deny our own experience—on the contrary, it can help us better understand the complex social and political context in which AIDS has been allowed to rampage.

At some point in the next decade, we likely will face a situation in which life-saving treatments—perhaps even a cure for AIDS—are available in the United States and Europe to a large number of white gay men. The impact of AIDS on our community will begin to diminish. But the epidemic will still rage in Africa, the Caribbean, the Philippines, and among people of color in the U.S. There, the general lack of health care for an impoverished population will play itself out as a continuing lack of access to

newly-available treatments. The perspectives on which we build our movement now will determine how we will respond to these future developments. When we succeed in placing our own struggle for survival in the context of people around the world who are also struggling to survive, then we will have truly transformed AIDS into a struggle for life—our own and others. This can only strengthen us.

THE CHALLENGE

The most difficult challenge facing the activist is to respond fully to the needs of the moment and to do so in such a way that the light one attempts to shine on the present will simultaneously illuminate the future.

— Angela Y. Davis
Women, Culture and Politics

As we look back, we can feel good about what we've accomplished. The AIDS activist movement has grown a lot in the two and a half years since we first took to the streets. In that short time, we've built

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Turns—But Stays Unreal" by Henry Gates, Jr., "There is very little connection between the social status of Black Americans and fabricated images of Black people that Americans consume each day. Moreover, the representations of Blacks on TV is a very poor index to our social advancement or political progress." Gates goes on to detail the transformations of the Black image from the days of "Amos 'n Andy" in the 1950s to "Cosby" in the 1980s.

The ascent of "The Cosby Show," as the most popular program in years, epitomizes the post-civil rights image of Black people. On the one hand, "Cosby" is a dignified departure from garish situation comedies (like "The Jeffersons" or "Webster") which portray Black people as either clowns or the adopted children of benevolent white parents. On the other, "Cosby" perpetuates the hoax of equal opportunity—that all Black people need to do is work hard in order to achieve a stable middle class existence for themselves and their children. When these programs do take on racism, the battlefield is far removed in time and/or place. It's safe to talk about Martin Luther King at Selma or the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. How can it matter to the white population that Black people are still suffering, if the victims of racism have no worth in their eyes?

These portrayals fly in the face of the reality that only a small percentage of Black families have entered the middle class. According to Gates, "The social vision of 'Cosby' throws the blame for black poverty back onto the impoverished." Part of the

a truly mass movement that has mobilized thousands of gay men and lesbians. With more than a little creativity, determination and militance we've gone up against government, medical science and pharmaceutical giants. We're taken seriously and we've won important victories that will save lives and change the face of health care in this country.

As a person living with AIDS, I've experienced the fear, the anger and the depression of fighting a life-threatening illness. I've also experienced the strength which the AIDS activist movement gives me to fight, even when I don't feel quite up to it. But there's a lot yet to be done before the history of the AIDS epidemic can be written. How that history turns out will depend in large part on the choices we make today. □

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basis of the popularity of "The Cosby Show" and "A Different World" is "that the black characters in them have finally become, in most respects, just like white people." One of the more ironic aspects of shows which portray "liberated" fantasies of Black success is that they may actually be fueling resentment among working class whites rather than abating it.

These images project and objectify a dualistic vision of Black people—bad, dangerous Black street criminals versus a safe Black middle class (just like whites). The character of Pino, in Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*, captures the schizophrenic impact of this dualism on Italian, working class youth in Brooklyn. The son of the white owner of a pizza parlor, he deeply resents a career pushing pizza in a neighborhood which is almost all Black. Like so many in this first post-civil rights generation, he detests and feels victimized by Black people, while at the same time maintaining that he isn't racist. Pino is always at the edge of a violent outburst. During an angry confrontation with Mookie, the Black deliveryman played by Spike Lee, Mookie asks him how he can hate Black people so much when he loves celebrities like Prince, Eddie Murphy and Michael Jordan. Taken aback by the question, Pino sputters before finally answering, "But they're not really Black, they're more than Black."

Black or "more than Black"—either way these images feed racism in white youth and damage the ability of the colonized Black Nation in America to achieve its freedom.

("New Faces of Racism" will be continued in the next issue of *Breakthrough*.) □