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LAW WEEKLY

FREE

HATUP

AND THE POLITICS OF AIDS

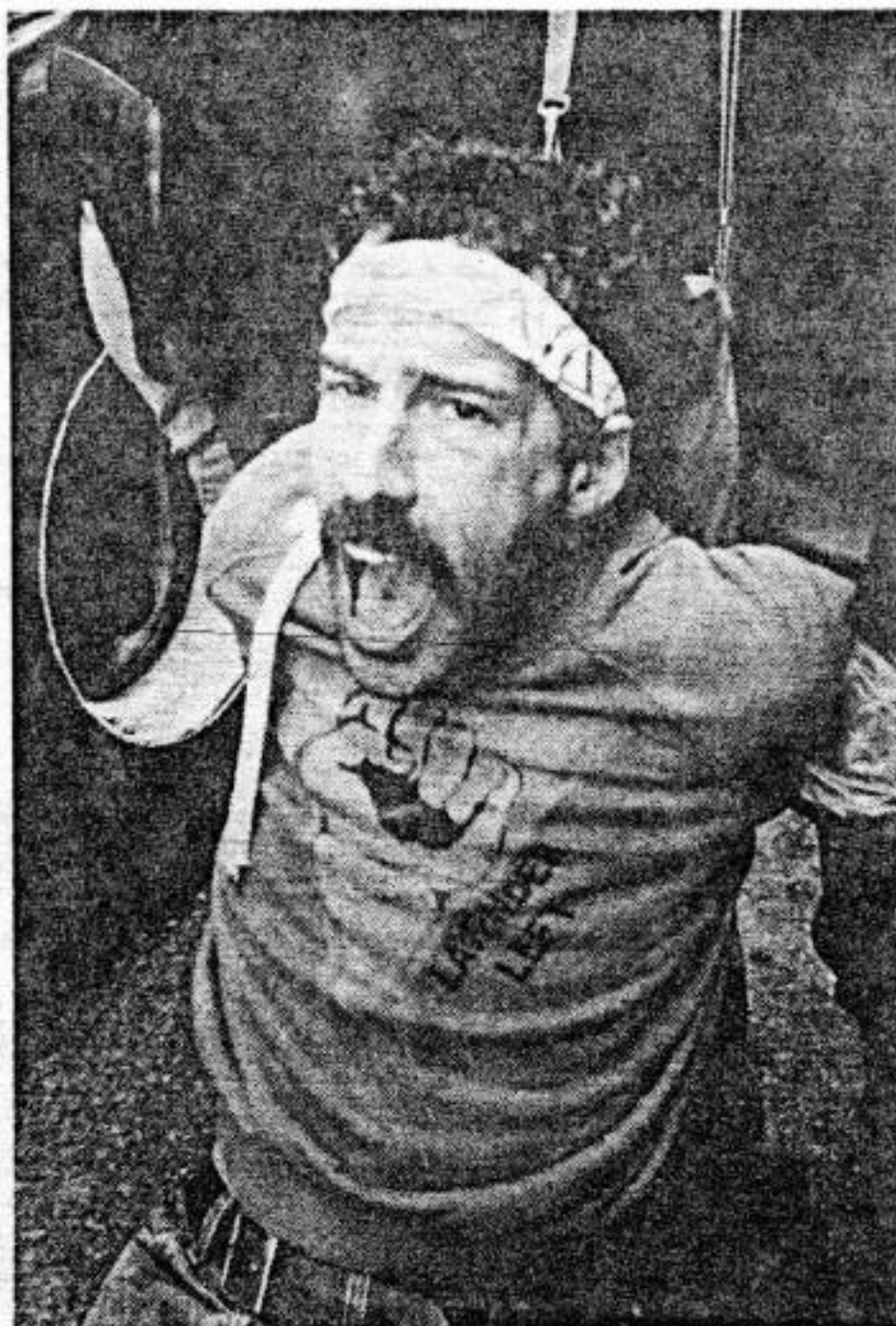
DOUG SADDOWNICK ON THE GROUP THAT'S
TRANSFORMING GAY IDENTITY IN LOS ANGELES



CONNIE NORMAN'S DEEP LAUGH ECHOES DOWN the Boyle Heights streets as she plays 20 Questions with her "boys." The winter moon lights up the campsite. Volunteers bring the troops provisions, security guards patrol the perimeter. The enemy is nowhere in sight. So Connie, in her sassy red winter boots, starts up a Marlboro and regales the curious with anecdotes about being neither man nor woman, but a transsexual — or as she prefers to call it, a "transy."

Connie is talking to her fellow members of the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power — ACT UP/L.A. — 200 of whom are holding a weeklong vigil at L.A. County/USC Medical Center. With a total membership of approximately 2,000, the L.A. chapter belongs to a national movement, with additional chapters in London and Paris, that has its origins two years ago in New York City. Although ACT UP's immediate goal is to "challenge the gross inadequacies of the governmental and private-sector responses to AIDS, and to create affirmative AIDS policies by non-violent public protest," ACT UP's combative style (and artistic panache) is also charting a new political identity for gays, lesbians and people with AIDS (PWAs).

Although there isn't a typical ACT UP/L.A. member, businessman Bruce Mirken or legal assistant Tony Arn or video artist Margie Edouardo represent a mien; white baby boomers, in their 20s and 30s, with little history of political activism and not all that much involvement in the so-called L.A. gay scene. (Does that mean white West Hollywood or Latino Silver Lake or heterogeneous



discovered that \$8.6 million in County AIDS dollars was going unspent during the fiscal year. (By the end of the June fiscal year, \$3 million was left unspent.)

ACT UP's charges of County AIDS neglect were many, but the major "crime" was the absence of an AIDS ward. PWAs lay in gurneys in corridors. Homophobic roommates have been known to taunt patients; Christian fundamentalists had coerced others to renounce homosexuality. The only thing preventing Gates from shifting the beds around, ACT UP member John Fall alleged, was "sadism, fear of change or a desire to use federal money for a 'show place' that would benefit only a few." Or, as Connie Norman put it: "Gates is stonewalling so much that he's gone past stone, darlin' — we're looking at something more carbonized and stunning."

The case for an AIDS ward was overwhelming: gathering AIDS patients not only benefits PWAs, it makes it easier for community-based AIDS service providers to locate potential clients. In addition, it is cost effective. Medi-Cal spends twice as much on L.A. AIDS patients as it does on San Francisco; where that city's General Hospital installed a state-of-the-art AIDS ward in 1983; hospital stays for PWAs

average 13.3 days in L.A. compared to 9.5 days in San Francisco. The people to blame? The conservative-majority L.A. County Board of Supervisors, all of whom, except for Ed Edelman, has opposed all but a few AIDS programs not related to testing.

Connie Norman sprinkled this information blithely through her

stories, and just as she was dispelling a sex-change myth ("Nooooo, it works, darlin' — I get wet as fast as I used to get hard"), all hell broke loose at the camp. An Edelman aide had informed ACT UP that the supervisor would pay a supportive visit the following morning. ACT UP security guards David Niblett and David Lee Perkins began rousing ACT UP members from sleeping bags. Pc man-by-day, activist-by-night Mark Kostopoulos, banging a can, gathered everyone in the campsite for an emergency meeting. ACT UPpers Bill Oxendine, Wade Richards, Rick Turner, Margie Edouardo, Peter Cashman and Chris Roy were running, alarmed; decisions had to be made fast.

Like a campfire plenary, apprehensive men and women gathered in a circle outside the hospital, prepared for the "consensus making" that normally takes place every Monday in West Hollywood's Plummer Park. The process that the group had worked so hard to cultivate (detractors say fetishize) — every individual has a "say," there are no leaders — was in evidence as the group debated motions and amendments that would, as it turned out, transform ACT UP into a lead player in L.A.'s AIDS and gay communities. "We will not call our elected officials 'friends,'" interjected Chris Roy, "while they allow this holocaust to continue." Enric Morello stated that Edelman knew "frightfully little about the efficacy of the ward," a fact activists found

CHUCK STALLARD

ACT UP

Venice?) It had taken AIDS to shatter their hopes for gay utopias — to make these college-educated, mostly privileged men and women see that people far more marginal than they were already so used to being treated prejudicially that AIDS-related discrimination didn't seem at all unusual.

What to do? ACT UP demands massive funding to end the AIDS pandemic; a worldwide funding program that would stop the genocide in Africa; national health care; the release of life-sustaining drugs; a federally funded education program. The list goes on. But ACT UP's agenda isn't merely one of ending AIDS, but of societal reform — to create the kind of America where the government, through education and a national health system, would prevent a disease like AIDS from spreading to the "disenfranchised" ever again.

IT WAS JANUARY 27, 1989, AND THE ACT UP/L.A. VIGIL IN FRONT OF L.A. COUNTY/USC Medical Center, the monolith that treats more AIDS patients than any hospital in the world, had been going on for six days. Although County/USC had some of L.A.'s finest AIDS doctors and nurses, it was the hospital management (in particular, County Director of Health Services Robert C. Gates) against whom ACT UP had been staging a yearlong war — replete with sit-ins (resulting in three arrests), "die-ins" (demonstrators drop to the floor while others trace outlines in indelible chalk), and well-researched position papers. In January 1989, activists

AND THE POLITICS OF AIDS

BY
DOUG
SADOWNICK

shocking at this late date. ACT UP, Kostopoulos argued, should give him a crash course. In an hour, ACT UP had made a collective decision: allow Edelman to speak, but heckle him if he resorts to generalities; warn Edelman that he better come up with something solid.

The next day, Michael Weinstein and Chris Brownlie of the AIDS Hospice Foundation, longtime ACT UP allies, arrived for the vigil's closing rally. Considered radical by such mainstream gay leaders as Ivy Bottini, president of the Stonewall Democratic Club, and Dave Johnson, executive director of Being Alive (now L.A. City AIDS coordinator), Weinstein and Brownlie had worked with Edelman in establishing L.A.'s impressive hospice system. Weinstein eyed the reporters from local TV stations and newspapers. Who called them? Chris Roy smiled. ACT UP, she hoped, was going to exploit the very cameras that had once exploited "AIDS victims."

Edelman arrived and, from ACT UP's perspective, spoke disappointing truisms. They heckled him: "No empty promises. People are dying now, Supervisor." Horrified that ACT UP was turning on one of its few straight, political allies, Chris Brownlie ran in front of the TV cameras to assail the group ("Ed Edelman is our friend... I'm ashamed of you"). The war within a war was thus declared. ACT UPpers were furious that Brownlie publicly attacked them, but Connie Norman, seeing Brownlie quiver from anger and illness, tried to dampen tempers ("It'd be morbid for family members not to disagree"). Most gays found the infighting "revolting," especially with the cameras rolling.

The Edelman Affair, as it became known, played not just on nighttime television, but also in the minds of L.A.'s gay leadership and County politicians. In the next eight months, ACT UP would proceed to offend everyone from Sheriff Sherman Block, who instigated a police investigation of the group, to publisher Bob Craig, who, in his gay paper, *Frontiers*, accused the group of "burning bridges." All of which underscores ACT UP's increasing influence in Los Angeles. In less than two years, they've become the city's largest and most controversial AIDS activist organization and, in the process, have transformed local gay politics.

THIS PAST WEEK, L.A. COUNTY/USC MEDICAL Center finally opened an AIDS ward — an accomplishment County officials attribute to pressure from ACT UP/L.A. (Still, ACT UP member Jim Stoffers complains that it's only a 12-bed ward; the group demanded more for the 60-plus AIDS patients admitted.) And although many gay leaders severely questioned ACT UP for the Edelman Affair, the event paved the way for monthly AIDS Community Advisory Council meetings in which ACT UPpers Connie Norman, Michael John Horne and Larry Day, along with activists Michael Weinstein and Chris Brownlie, meet with Dr. Peter Heseltine, chief epidemiologist at County/USC, and Bob Frangenberg, director of the AIDS Program Office, as well as other administrators. County/USC Hospital Administrator Richard Cordova, who has not always



CONNIE NORMAN: "It'd be morbid for family members not to disagree."

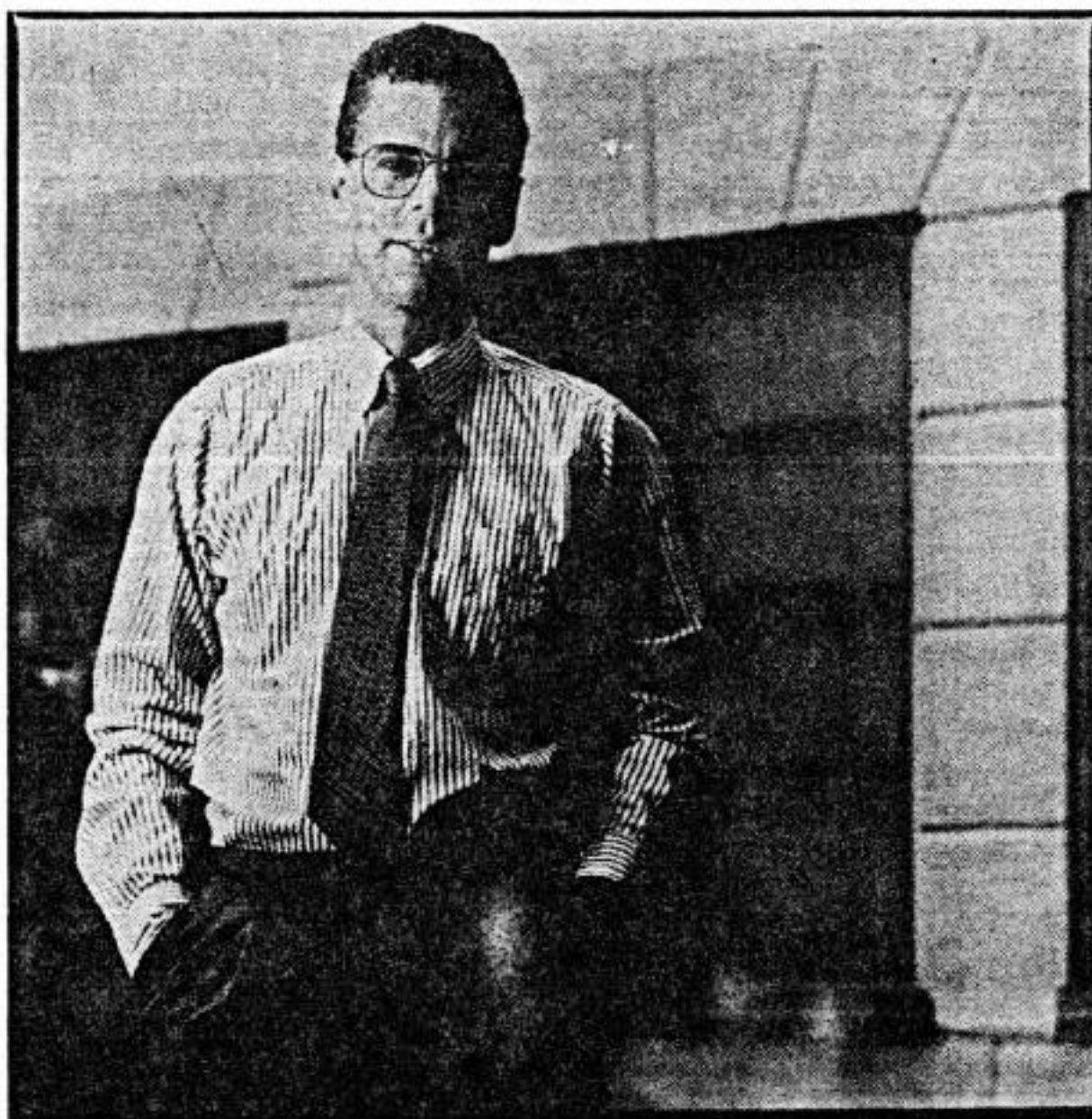
been conciliatory to AIDS activists, now has "only good things to say about the group," which he calls "most professional and most informed." Once, he explains, he even threatened to sic ACT UP on a bureaucratic agency.

The AIDS ward isn't the only victory to which ACT UP has contributed. The group has helped force Connaught Labs to release the Salk Polio vaccine to PWAs; it has pressured the Board of Supervisors to make aerosolized pentamidine — a preventative treatment for pneumocystis, the No. 1 AIDS killer — available at County/General. It has also waged a fight against Employers Health Insurance, which has been known to triple PWAs' premiums or cancel them altogether; ACT UP has won concessions regarding the company's policy of not reimbursing for aerosolized pentamidine treatments. As significant, ACT UP has radicalized the L.A. gay community with numerous actions: by pulling sympathetic bar habitués onto Santa Monica Boulevard for a "death

march" the night Prop. 96 was passed; disrupting Sheriff Sherman Block at an L.A. County Sheriff Academy graduation, shouting "Why don't you give prisoners condoms to protect themselves?"; and inspiring a collection of AIDS groups called the Coalition for Compassion to mount a monthlong hunger strike in West Hollywood this past September.

ACT UP's success has surprised many — not the least of which is gay L.A. Los Angeles boasts one of the nation's most organized and monied gay communities — and also one of its more cautious. This formidable financial clout has fueled several influential gay lobbying organizations and PACs, political victories in West Hollywood, and the country's largest and oldest Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center and numerous AIDS agencies. By the same token, this desire for access seems to have retarded what ACT UP member David Niblett says is most needed during the AIDS crisis: a confrontational politics that exposes how little politicians are doing for AIDS and the people-of-color communities. In effect, ACT UP has forced the gay and lesbian community to face its continuing marginality in politics.

On some level, ACT UP came into being because, ACT UP member Bruce Mirken says, few groups, with the exception of the AIDS Hospice Foundation, were being combative enough to fight against AIDS. Says Mark Kostopoulos, "I don't think you can work in the AIDS bureaucracy and be an AIDS activist; I think it's a conflict of interest." The debate lay in how to respond appropriately to the crisis: to be part of the bureaucratic system or to pressure it from the outside? To put it another way, ACT UP insists on maintaining its political independence, even at the risk of being a pariah. Should 12,000 Angelenos attend the AIDS Project Los Angeles AIDS walk-a-thon that raises \$1.8 million or demonstrate in front of the Federal Building until the government increases funding by a hundred times that much? Both strategies may be required, but the point is that without public manifestations of anger, people will die quicker than they have to. "There is simply no way



PETER CASHMAN: Complain more, not less

DEBRA DIPOALO

DEBRA DIPOALO

around that," ACT UP member Peter Cashman says. "A collar-and-a-tie gay attitude won't do a thing when there are 90,000 PWAs in this country, with 1-million-plus said to be infected."

ACT UP WAS BEGUN BY A MAN NO ONE LIKED — novelist and playwright Larry Kramer. In retrospect, that seems to make sense. In 1979, many gays had vilified Kramer for his "politically incorrect" condemnation of sex without love in his novel *Faggots*. So when, in 1981, Kramer began wailing that sex was leading to death, most gays rejected it as Old Testament alarm. Sure enough, the body-count mounted; Kramer went on to help found Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City, still the country's largest AIDS service provider. A year later, he offended his own organization, as it moved toward the mainstream, when he screamed "Closet queen, you're killing us!" at New York Mayor Edward Koch during a public health conference. In 1983, Kramer published a now-famous article, "1,112 and Counting," in gay newspapers throughout the country, which tried to shame gay people into demanding immediate action from the federal government. Few listened.

In the mid-'80s, Kramer wrote *The Normal Heart*, a hit play about New York's failure to contain AIDS. Barbra Streisand, who wanted to play the character based on biologist Mathilde Krim, optioned it for a Hollywood movie. Some people began to see Kramer as a prophet, others continued to think he was hysterical — he continued to yell that time was running out. In 1983, the federal government spent \$500,000 in four months to cure Legionnaires' Disease, more money than it had coughed up in eight years to fight AIDS. Why weren't gays taking to the streets? Did they have a death wish?

Kramer had perhaps done more than anyone to alter the context in which the disease is talked about. But on March 10, 1987, Kramer gave a speech at New York's Gay and Lesbian Community Center that changed the way gay politics would be talked about forever. "If my speech tonight doesn't scare the shit out of you, we're in real trouble. If what you're hearing tonight doesn't rouse you to anger, fury, rage and action, gay men will have no future here on Earth. How long does it take before you get angry and fight back? I sometimes think we have a death wish... We have sat back and let ourselves literally be knocked off man-by-man — without fighting back."

Several weeks later, on March 24, approximately 300 young men and women flooded to a Wall Street corner to rail against the Food and Drug Administration policy of keeping life-sustaining drugs bound up in their nine-year approval process, in which half of the terminally ill get the effective treatment while the other half get a placebo and die. The group called itself the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power — ACT UP. The demonstration made the evening news. A few days later, when FDA chief Dr. Frank Young talked about speedier drug releases, Dan Rather credited ACT UP with the change. Nine months later, ACT UP/L.A. was founded.

ACT UP MEETINGS IN NEW YORK, SAN FRANCISCO AND L.A. have acquired a politically romantic aura unheard of in these death-shrouded cities. With its leather jackets, boys-into-the-Smiths, anti-clone, nouvelle-les-



DAVID LEE PERKINS and DAVID NIBLETT: Appalled at "internalized homophobia"

bian, sex-positive, safe-sex-obsessed attitudes, ACT UP meetings have become notorious for, in the words of ACT UP/L.A. member Jim Feldman, meeting Mr. Right. "There seemed nothing wrong defining the experience of being young, gay, lesbian, of color, and angry in the '80s," adds ACT UP member and film critic Vito Russo, "as also being political and sexy."

ACT UP/L.A. members Tom Siegel, a costume designer for TV, and Joseph Shuldiner, a visual artist, say much of the group's appeal comes from its dedication to style. It is certainly true that the Silence=Death — and now Action=Life — slogans have provided the group with instant identification (the design — coupled with a pink triangle, the Nazis' code for gay death-camp inmates — appears on T-shirts, banners, and the office doors of ACT UP's enemies). In the words of one observer, "They're the best art-directed political group in America." New York's "Let the Record Show" neon-lit indictment of Reagan toured museums throughout the country, as has its MTV-style video, collaging ACT UP's cinematic triumphs. ACT UP/L.A. members surprised peers in Washington

last October with extremely tasteful, "hate" banners depicting homophobes like Phyllis Schlafly, Jesse Helms and Adolf Hitler. In fact, an entire contingent of local artists have created their own ACT UP wing; their name changes, but their last spectacle, produced by "Stiff Sheets," offered a fashion show replete with commentary and outfits made from enema bags, hospital gowns and IV tubing.

Civil disobedience, which is not mandatory within ACT UP and is practiced only by those who receive training, has become a primary tactic during frequent "zaps." Whether the zap takes the form of a sit-in at the Board of Supervisors office or a "kiss-in" at L.A.'s gay and lesbian parade, it follows guidelines that provide for maximum media impact. Each "zap" has a goal — to embarrass a public official, to press for faster release of drugs. Position papers are distributed to spectators; legal observers are selected to serve as witnesses (especially in case of an arrest); and representatives are pre-chosen if sudden group decisions (such as getting arrested) are required.

What surprises most newcomers to ACT UP is not its anger, or its style, or even its strategies, but its emphasis on creating a new and joyful definition of community. (In L.A., that entails a spiritual dimension; ACT UP has forged a loyal bond with unlikely New Age partners: Louise Hay's group, and more directly with Sally Fisher's Northern Lights Alternative.) To be sure, ACT UP is based on the conviction that AIDS would never have spread, had it not been for homophobia. But on a day-to-day level, ACT UP has helped break down the psychic damage and cult-of-coolness that has kept many gay men and lesbians from imagining themselves as belonging to something larger and more powerful than West Hollywood — thanks in large measure to ACT UP's celebration of participatory democracy and human eccentricity. In a word, ACT UP explodes the nonsense about what gays and lesbians look or act like. As Kramer says, "We are not only fighting every battle and venting every rage, we are Mickey and Judy putting on a show." That show is changing gay identity.

IT'S ALSO CHANGING THE WAY MANY AMERICANS VIEW terminal diseases — not just AIDS. Indeed, the news about AIDS is better than it's been since the epidemic began. Drugs are in the pipeline that may keep an estimated million-plus Americans with HIV-disease from dying or even from becoming symptomatic. At last May's Fifth International Conference on AIDS in Montreal, Dr. Robert Gallo, the so-called discoverer of the so-called AIDS virus and no friend to AIDS activists, announced that "the tools needed to solve this epidemic are in our hands."

But the availability of life-sustaining treatments remains uncertain nine years into the epidemic — especially when one considers that only one drug, the \$6,500-a-year AZT, has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration. There's been no commitment from the FDA or the National Institute of Health to make the dozen or so drugs circulating through the AIDS underground accessible, a fact that *The New York Times* recently and finally called tragic. Peter Cashman points out that ACT UP/N.Y.'s Treatment and Data Committee has just

FED UP ON OCTOBER 6

ON OCTOBER 6, ACT UP/L.A. WILL STAGE AN ACTION AT Westwood's Federal Building, at the corner of Veteran Ave. and Wilshire Blvd., at 6 a.m. The demonstration will coincide with ACT UP demos in 20 other American cities — such as Syracuse, Houston, San Francisco, Ann Arbor and Kansas City, to name a few. Their demands include: 1) the release of AIDS drugs now; 2) an emergency federal program to end AIDS; 3) an end to HIV-related discrimination; and 4) quality health care for all. It's estimated that at least 100 demonstrators will be arrested in an act of civil disobedience culminating in the shutdown of the building. Supporters are encouraged to show up.

ACT UP



TED SOQUI

ued a document in June that listed five drugs (DDI, EPO, fluconazole, Foscarnet and GM-CSF) out which enough is known (from underground use and NIH tests) for them to be made available immediately. Also, there are highly promising treatments (Compound Q, CD4-immunoadhesin, passive immunotherapy and peptide T) that ACT UP demands must be tested faster. While some people are already benefiting from these drugs in community-based trials, no insurance company will pay for costly drugs until they are FDA-approved. Until ACT UP applied pressure for the approval of aerosolized penicillin as an effective prophylaxis against the killer pneumonia, the HIV-infected who had insurance couldn't get reimbursed for it. And those who couldn't afford it got sick unnecessarily.

Last month, ACT UP was instrumental in forcing the FDA into accepting "parallel tracking," a radical shift in regulatory approach that benefits any group — not just those suffering from HIV. Now promising but unproved drugs can be used by terminal patients even while traditional clinical trials continue. (Just last Friday, the FDA approved the early release of DDI — an accomplishment due in large part to the efforts of ACT UP). Even Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, acknowledges that ACT UP has helped to shift his thinking from "protecting the consumer" to "honoring the rights of the terminally ill." Dr. Martin Broder, head of the National Cancer Institute, calls the shift, which he says will benefit cancer patients as well, "revolutionary."

IN LESS THAN TWO YEARS, ACT UP HAS BECOME LOS ANGELES' LARGEST AND MOST CONTROVERSIAL AIDS ACTIVIST ORGANIZATION AND, IN THE PROCESS, AS TRANSFORMED LOCAL GAY POLITICS.

AT THE END OF APRIL, GRAFFITI IN THE form of bodies outlined in red spray paint began appearing in front of the County Hall of Administration, the entrance way to County/USC, and Health Commissioner Robert C. Gates' parking space. The graffiti read: "Gates Must Go" and "Schabarum Is a Murderer." County officials were infuriated. Gay leaders were embarrassed. Both pointed angry fingers in the same direction: ACT UP. The group denied any responsibility for the vandalism, but didn't condemn it.

In response, County Supervisor Pete Schabarum said that "If you were to poll the man on the street, the vast majority of people would not have any interest in AIDS or AIDS funding." ACT UP picketed his house and lobbied the County AIDS Commission to criticize the statement. On May 16, ACT UP staged a noisy demonstration in the Board of Supervisors' hearing room, an action that Connie Norman says provoked Schabarum into playing hardball.

Schabarum proposed that \$25,000 in AIDS treatment funds pay for the act-up. At this point, the Sheriff's Department began to investigate ACT UP. The organization had long assumed that undercover police and/or federal agents attended their meetings, but this was something altogether different — an investigation "intended to silence our work, intimidate our membership and divert our attention," in the words of attorney and ACT UP member David Etezadi. ACT UP speculates that the investigation cost Sheriff's Department at least \$500,000 — a figure a Sheriff's Department spokesman would neither confirm nor deny. ("This pointless investigation," ACT UP member Gunther Freehill, "shows that the County would rather spend money on graffiti than AIDS.") For the next three months, ACT UP members Chris Roy, John Fall, Chuck Stallard and Wendell Jones say they were harassed. They charge that the Sheriff's Department followed them, bugged their homes, bugged their telephones and questioned their employers. Sheriff's deputies searched Fall's Toyota, impounding it for a week. During the Christopher Street West parade, deputies videotaped the ACT UP contingent.

The unrelenting assault came at a bad time for ACT UP. In April, Dave Manson of Being Alive had already led a spirited attack on the group that was gaining some community momentum. In a Being Alive newsletter, Manson suggested that his own organization was better equipped to be

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"leading the fight" against AIDS because, he wrote, there are no PWAs in ACT UP. His essay echoed feelings of other gay leaders who were too timid to speak: "Many of the people involved in 'AIDS activism' today have a very different agenda from ours. It is a key element in leftist ideology that the way to advance leftism is to find issues like AIDS and use them to promote socialism . . . I only ask that they pretend to stop speaking for my community." (ACT UP accused Johnson of "ugly red-baiting," adding that indeed many ACT UP members are PWAs.)

Shortly thereafter, when Johnson arrived at work one day, he found this message, emblazoned in red spray paint: "Dave Must Go!" Bob Craig, publisher of

Frontiers, the L.A. gay paper with the largest circulation, then charged that ACT UP was doing more harm than good to end AIDS. Subsequently, both men have tried to heal these rifts — Johnson apologized for causing ACT UP "unnecessary pain," Craig now says he's not anti-ACT UP — but both their editorials revealed the extent to which ACT UP was threatening the local gay hierarchy.

On July 26, the American Civil Liberties Union demanded that the L.A. County Sheriff's Department cease and desist from harassing members of ACT UP. Calling the activity il-

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legal, it made a formal request for all records concerning their surveillance. Half of the surveillance materials were handed over. There has been no further harassment since that time. However, in August, the Sheriff's Department charged, but did not arrest, John Fall, Mark Kostopoulos and Wendell Jones with painting graffiti on County buildings. They deny the charge.

FOR WEEKS THIS SUMMER, ORANGE County's Rev. Lou Sheldon, head of the Traditional Values Coalition, mounted an attack on "the sodomites." He was thrown out of a Santa Ana City Council meeting for screaming at its members for granting the Orange County Cultural Pride parade (a polite pseudonym for "Gay Pride") its very first permit. Orange County gays had never had a parade of their own — an institution in L.A. for the last 20 years. Heeding the call from Morris Kight, godfather of the Gay Liberation Front, Angelenos attended the event in substantial numbers. The presence of anti-gay fundamentalists spread throughout the parade spelled trouble. In L.A., the police are prepared for conflict and provide a roped-in area for fundamentalists. In Orange County, where skinheads roamed freely with signs that said, "GAY: Got AIDS Yet?," the police had made no such provisions.

In response, members of ACT UP/L.A., ACT UP/Long Beach and the Orange County Visibility League decided to have a "kiss-in," a standard parade event, near a group of 30 fundamentalists and their children. According to Sandy Dwyer, editor of the highly regarded gay and lesbian paper *The News*, fundamentalists shoved protesters. The police then called for the crowd of gay and lesbian activists to clear the area and began to beat those who didn't move fast enough. Photographs and videotapes corroborate her account. Two gays (none ACT UP members), one supporter and three fundamentalists were arrested.

In the following days, gay leaders condemned ACT UP's "kiss-in." Festival organizer Janet Avery announced that "some" people had brought "their anger" to a parade that was meant to be a celebration. Even Morris Kight, an "ACT UP fan," felt that their "militancy was unfortunate." Michael Weinstein called it "counterproductive." Talk of a lawsuit from the Orange County Cultural Party against ACT UP swept through the community, a possibility Avery neither confirms or denies. There were also reports that the Orange

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CENTRAL TO ACT UP'S POLITICS IS A THESIS BORROWED FROM PHILOSOPHER HANNAH ARENDT: THAT THE VICTIM CANNOT BE EXCUSED FROM RESPONSIBILITY FOR HIS OR HER VICTIMIZATION

County parade's insurance carrier, the same for all the Pride parades, would raise rates to six figures for any parade ACT UP attended.

ACT UP members felt scapegoated for a debacle that the police must surely have anticipated — and Lou Sheldon could only applaud. Members David Niblett and Mark Sprecher questioned whether the KKK would be "so welcome" at an NAACP gathering. Added Mark Kostopoulos, "It's sort of astounding that people would watch TV footage of gay and lesbian people being beaten by the police and blame gay and lesbian people for it."

ALTHOUGH ACT UP MEMBERS CHRIS ROY, David Lee Perkins and David Niblett are appalled at what they view as the "internalized homophobia" of the Orange County gay leaders who "resent ACT UP for sticking up for gay people," they're not surprised that a fight against AIDS should entail a fight between gays. Central to ACT UP's politics is a thesis that Larry Kramer borrowed from philosopher Hannah Arendt: that the victim cannot be excused from responsibility for his or her victimization. It's not surprising, then, that many established gay leaders are threatened by ACT UP — implicitly (and sometimes quite openly), they are targets of ACT UP's anger.

Kramer argues that groups like AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA) have done more to hurt than help the AIDS effort by absolving the government from its responsibility to provide care. The best strategy for gay people, says Peter Cashman, is to fight the tendency for validation and acceptance: complain more, not less. Kramer proposes that society hates gays (and Jews) not really because it hates homosexuality (and Judaism), but because it sees something in these people that it is afraid of becoming: victims. ACT UP has taken that point one step further: that freedom exists only when citizens engage in political action. "Every pariah who refused to be a rebel was partly responsible for his own position," writes Arendt in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, "and therewith for the blot on mankind which it represented. From such shame there was no escape."

In an issue of *The Nation* last February, gay journalist Darell Yates Rist mounted the most significant intellectual challenge ACT UP has encountered so far. He described the organization as a group of white elitists (vying, as usual, for power) who were instituting a trendy culture around death, fetishizing it to the point of perversity. Rist labeled ACT UP's politics as little more than "fashionable

hysteria." It was a charge some gay people, especially those of color, agree with. Although ACT UP/L.A. has an increasing number of women and has made a strong alliance with the Coalition for Safe and Legal Abortion (pro-choicers call ACT UP "ghost busters"), the group remains primarily white, middle-class and male. And although Mark Kostopoulos says that "it would be naive to think that an organization coming out of this culture could within itself eliminate racism," he concedes that ACT UP's inability to cross racial lines has been its greatest weakness so far.

Rist's other accusation, that ACT UP fetishizes death, ignores, among other things, the slogan that ACT UP/L.A. has contributed to the movement: Action=Life. And it ignores ACT UP/L.A.'s other, albeit less tangible, achievement: its ability to create a community that sees beyond itself. "AIDS is a tragedy," says ACT UP member Helene Schpak, "but it points out to us affected by it that there is no conflict between public health and civil rights, but effective public health policy depends on civil rights."

Much of the history of the gay movement has been a history of denial — a refusal to see oneself as disenfranchised, and the building of structures to ensure the illusion of security. If nothing else, AIDS has exposed this illusion. And while ACT UP's tactics may be rude and confrontational, the times call for nothing less. 



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