

THE AIDS COMMUNITY IN LOS ANGELES

A Brutal Fight for Life



Chuck Stallard

Summer 1988: Activists protest government's "business as usual" attitude during the AIDS crisis.



Chuck Stallard

April 1988: ACT UP stages "sit-in" at County/USC, demanding an AIDS ward.

AIDS MAY BE EVERY-where in L.A., but so are its valiant enemies. In a South-Central church, the Rev. Carl Bean leads his flock — many of whom are persons with AIDS (PWAs) — in Motown-inspired hymns. Across town, West Hollywood gym regulars turn out for a Halloween Saturnalia but are bombarded by street activists from ACT UP chanting, “One AIDS death every half hour.” Meanwhile, in East L.A., Jennie Reyes, the mother of a young man who died of AIDS last year, pleads, “*Mamacitas*, would you rather hear that your sons are gay *before* they get infected with AIDS or afterward?” A few days later, in a lecture hall jam-packed with 200 PWAs, doctors Michael Gottlieb and Mark Katz deliver lectures with new messages: “You don’t have to die from AIDS”; meanwhile, in a pediatrics ward at L.A. County/USC Medical Center, a baby is cradled in the arms of a nurse who knows the infected infant is dying.

Welcome to Los Angeles’ AIDS community. For better or worse, that’s what it is, a community — not a ghetto, not even a medical or a political category, but a living and breathing cultural entity where people

can’t talk enough about how they, as PWAs, *live* with AIDS; a community where lovers, nurses, friends, mothers and fathers devote their nights and days to caring for those who are bedridden, demented or just recently diagnosed. Here, hospital visitors grow fluent in the lingo used with men and women too young to be so sick. Here, even the potential “Hi, how are you?” must be translated by a visitor into more specific (and thoughtful) AIDS-speak: “My, that egg lecithin treatment does look yummy” or “You’re absolutely a new man after that transfusion.” Here “AIDS victims” has been replaced by “PWAs.”

In this burgeoning AIDS community, activists (many of whom have AIDS themselves) emerge from obscurity to become influential lobbyists in Sacramento or gadflies in public hearings with the sleepy L.A. County Board of Supervisors — the gang of five that, with the sole exception of Ed Edelman, has allowed the perceived homophobia and racism of their voters to stand in the way of stemming L.A.’s AIDS avalanche. After years of acting the part of

the self-effacing yet self-sufficient victims, the L.A. AIDS community is becoming a hotbed of grassroots activism no less revolutionary than the freedom riders of the ’60s. When dealing with a disease as stigmatizing as AIDS, leaders such as PWA Chris Brownlie now recognize that only nonviolent activism can bring the change their lives depend on.

To truly understand L.A.’s emerging activist spirit — and to offer up a model by which other badly treated groups can unite and demand positive change in the age of callous Reaganomics — it’s important to examine the history of the response to AIDS in L.A. To do so one must delve into the morass of internal civil wars, class struggles and confrontations with that persona non grata, Death himself, that inevitably led this particular grouping of individuals to install a light at the end of the AIDS tunnel, rather than blithely wait for the oncoming bullet train.

WITH 5,897 REPORTED AIDS cases as of Oct. 31, L.A. ranks as the city with the third highest

number of AIDS cases in America. New York is the first, San Francisco the second. But even though more Angelenos are coming down with AIDS than ever before, fewer of them are dying as quickly as they used to. Estimates vary, but by 1992 as many as 300,000 people in L.A. County may be infected with Human Immunodeficiency Virus or HIV, the virus most doctors believe causes AIDS. As many as a third will be black and Latino. That’s frightening news, considering that most scientists now predict that 85 percent of those infected with HIV will develop full-blown AIDS during the virus’ 7-to-10-year incubation period.

But the actual prognosis isn’t as bleak as it sounds. When the first cases of gay men with Kaposi’s sarcoma (a benign skin cancer common in elderly Mediterranean men, but fatal to those with compromised immune systems) or *Pneumocystis carinii* (a lethal pneumonia) were rushed to UCLA, doctors had very little with which to treat these walking skeletons, who soon died.

In just the last few months, however, doctors have learned how to monitor the human immune system so precisely that they can predict when an individual will lose his ability to dispel the small infections

BY DOUG SADOWNICK

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that constantly infiltrate the body. The medical technology of treating HIV infection has developed to such an impressive degree that doctors now know how, through the use of various prophylactic drugs, to keep at bay many of the raging opportunistic infections that most often kill those with collapsed immune systems. AIDS doctors like Mark Katz believe it likely that by next year AIDS could be considered more a manageable chronic illness than a catastrophic one, no more or less deadly than diabetes, if still a bit more stigmatizing.

At that point, there will be no ignoring the festering flaws of the American medical system, a system that combines highly developed technology with a inequitable distribution of health care and that places more value on costly diagnostic care for those who can afford it than on the preventive measures that could help people too poor and too underprivileged to benefit from treatment by America's best practitioners. The AIDS onslaught will force the county system to devise some creative middle ground between the two options it offers now to those without health benefits: costly in-patient care (hospitalization) or costly out-patient care (clinic visits).

According to Michael Weinstein of the AIDS Hospice Foundation, "By the time AIDS is just a traumatic memory, we'll have made sure that the infrastructure will be in place to handle any other diseases that may be brewing." Adds Dave Johnson, executive director of Being Alive, a PWA action coalition, "The ideal is to pave the way for coping with the ailing and disproportionately large elderly or disenfranchised Third World population of the 21st century." Their point? Despite the supervisors' reluctance to plan ahead in dealing with the unique health-care demands of an epidemic, by the 1990s AIDS activists will have forced L.A. County to

ble sense of self-worth to give community leaders a shot of adrenalin with which to buck that system and make the public take notice of all the death. (It took the death of Rock Hudson in 1985 to bring AIDS into America's living rooms.)

THE FIRST CASES OF IMMUNE-system disorders were discovered in L.A. in late 1980 by doctors Gottlieb and Joel Weisman. At that time, the local gay community was among the world's richest and best organized. What other U.S. community could boast a leader/philanthropist like Sheldon Andelson, who wielded influence over Democratic Party luminaries such as Ted Kennedy and Jerry

meeting (which activists Chris Brownlie and Phill Wilson characterized as "tame and polite as can be"), at which Weisman advised the audience that it wasn't clear whether a virus or a bad batch of poppers was causing this disease, but his hunch was that "everyone should stop having so much sex." Vilified by one gay leader who saw Weisman's advice as a ploy to make more money off his gay clientele, Weisman terminated his role as community spokesman. Instead, he directed his efforts to caring for the dying patients already flooding his office and advising the AIDS-service organizations sprouting up all over L.A. on how to fill the vacuum created by Reagan's slashing of health-care budgets.

The following groups are the non-profit AIDS service organizations discussed in the *Weekly's* AIDS stories.

AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP). This nationwide network was founded first in New York in March 1987 and in Los Angeles in December 1987 to challenge governmental and private-sector responses to AIDS and create affirmative AIDS policies by non-violent public protest. It receives no public money.

Aid for AIDS (AFA). Founded in 1983 to sidestep APLA's bureaucratic processes and offer direct financial assistance to PWAs and PWARCs for rent, utilities and food. In 1987 AFA gave away \$317,536. The money is raised entirely by private donations. AFA workers' salaries are paid for by the city of West Hollywood.

AIDS Hospice Foundation (AHF). First known as the Los Angeles AIDS Hospice Committee, AHF evolved from an advocacy group to a foundation when it decided to open hospices of its own in South-Central and Hollywood to care for the terminally ill. AHF has a budget of \$4 million. (State: \$3 million. County: \$400,000. Private donations: \$400,000.)

AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA). Founded in 1982, APLA is a non-profit agency dedicated to providing vital human services (food programs, emergency shelter, education) to people with AIDS and AIDS-related illnesses. The budget was \$12 million, but due to streamlining in the last few months it's been reduced to \$6 million. Break-down not available.

Being Alive. This Persons With AIDS action coalition was formed in December 1985 in an attempt to give PWAs a powerful voice in the AIDS community, demanding accountability from all other AIDS agencies. Services include: monthly meetings, advocacy, a monthly newsletter and a speaker's bureau. (Budget: \$139,600. City of West Hollywood: \$38,000. Private fund-raising: \$101,000.)

Cara a Cara. Founded in March '87 as an AIDS prevention and education project dedicated to meeting the needs of the Latino community. Services include: crisis in-

too weak to shop. For years, APLA enjoyed wholehearted support from the gay community. When Redman and Cole-Sawaya passed the hat during the first fund-raiser at Cole-Sawaya's home, Redman remembers that \$7,000 was immediately raised from a few friends; that was just the beginning. As the case load grew, so did APLA's revenues. (And its alienation from the community. By 1983, Morris Kight, leather man Bill Green and female impersonator Nasty Nan, angered by what they saw as APLA's emerging bureaucracy, founded Aid for AIDS to offer money directly to needy PWAs. That same year, the L.A. Shanti Foundation emerged to deal with the emotional grief surrounding AIDS, which APLA didn't handle.)

But this illusion of autonomy fell apart only a couple of years later. In 1985, Hugh Rice from the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center and John Mortimer from APLA launched one of the most creative and effective safe-sex projects in the country to date, one of which was called "Mother's Handy Sex Guide." (It helped to nearly end new HIV infection among gay men.) On brochures and billboards, it featured photos of Zelda "Poltergeist" Rubenstein reminding bare-chested men to "play safely." The booklets were spiced with titillating vignettes about the joys of protected anal and oral sex — the idea was to eroticize safe sex. Tourists from the East Coast were impressed by what seemed like an educational blitzkrieg in L.A. as compared to the absence, as late as 1985, of any public notifications about AIDS in New York City. On the surface, outsiders were moved by the life-affirming subtext of the billboards, just as they were awed by the powerful emergence of an AIDS spiritual community founded by healer-teacher Louise Hay. San Franciscans and New Yorkers, burnt-out from grief overload, talked about how "L.A. just has the best attitude about

activists will have forced L.A. County to completely revise the way it deals with catastrophic illness. The supervisors will never be the same, and neither will the community it tried to wish away.

The scandal is that until late in the '80s, virtually no AIDS leader existed in Los Angeles with enough guts to stand up to the supervisors, although Dr. Neil Schram and gay leaders Morris Kight and Hugh Rice did what they could to inject voices of reason into the hysteria that descended on California gays from the political right. Before 1987, there was no coalition optimistic enough about the tradition of American activism to demonstrate in front of Deukmejian's lawn. There was no AIDS organization dedicated to addressing the epidemic in L.A.'s ethnic communities or the appalling quality of care for the most underprivileged. L.A. had no outspoken maniac like New York's Larry Kramer, who shamed complacent gays for not doing more to "save our brothers' lives." And even with the plethora of gay rags in L.A., before the arrival of *The News* there was none as feisty as the *New York Native*, willing to make AIDS politics, AIDS culture and AIDS treatment a cornerstone of its coverage.

Sure, the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center played an important role during the health crisis — but it has traditionally placed obtaining service over staging radicalizing outcries. Sure, there have been plenty of candlelight marches. And the L.A. Shanti Foundation has provided much-needed emotional support to those grieving. People even joked about interminable gala fund-raisers organized by AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA), where power-hungry board of directors rubbed elbows with the likes of Elizabeth Taylor. All in all, L.A. gays responded heroically to the tragedy to which the system had abandoned them. Yet there was no palpa-

ble organization dedicated to meeting the needs of the Latino community. Services include: crisis intervention, support groups for PWAs and PWARCs, and a culturally sensitive speaker's bureau. It has a budget of \$100,000, all of which is state money.

Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center (GLCSC). Founded 17 years ago, this is the largest social-services agency targeting lesbians and gays in the world, providing basic health, medical care, education, counseling, legal aid, job-placement and referral, housing and clothing. (Budget: \$4.2 million from state, county, city and private funds.)

Minority AIDS Project (MAP). Founded in 1985 to provide mental, emotional and financial services for persons with AIDS and ARC who are among the minorities who may be undocumented. It has a budget of \$450,000. (State: \$350,000. Federal: \$50,000. Private fund-raising: \$50,000.)

Los Angeles Shanti Foundation. Founded in 1983 as a support organization for people with AIDS or ARC, or their significant others. (Budget: State: \$115,000. County: \$39,000. City of West Hollywood: \$56,000. Private fund-raising: \$205,000.)

Watts Health Foundation. Founded in 1966, it opened an AIDS office in 1986 to do outreach in low-income areas in minority communities in L.A. Its current budget is \$240,000. (State: \$150,000. State subcontract with APLA: \$50,000. County: \$44,000.)

Brown?

But this foot in the mainstream door allowed much of the gay bourgeoisie of the time to disregard the fact that they were vulnerable. When it became clear that certain homosexuals (those who were fist-fucking, drinking urine and/or enjoying anal sex with innumerable partners) were coming down with AIDS, the bulk of the gay community said, "Well, that's not me" — even though such activities cut through various strata of gay life — and by implication, accepted one of this plague's fundamental social realities: a near-biblical urge to punish certain undesirables. And in 1981 that meant that gays were overlooking — and hurting — other gays.

In late 1982, Ivy Bottini and Morris Kight, the two most visible and outspoken gay community leaders around, recognized how deep this suicidal denial ran. They had already lost two close friends and colleagues, Ken Schnorr and Steve Berman, to AIDS; Schnorr had worked with Bottini as a leader of the influential Stonewall Democratic Club. Bottini organized a town

While the local gay community couldn't summon up the daring necessary to shock government into a more active role, it capitalized on the self-reliance it had perfected in the '70s and offered services galore to those afflicted. Independent (and very comfortable) men and women in L.A. may have dismissed Larry Kramer, founder of New York's Gay Men's Health Crisis in 1981 and author of the acclaimed AIDS play *The Normal Heart*, as a lunatic for calling Mayor Ed Koch "a murderer" (Koch refused to meet with GMHC for two years; by then 2,000 people had died from AIDS in that city), but they were inspired by Kramer's gumption.

Following in his footsteps, Matt Redman, Nancy Cole-Sawaya, Erv Munro and Max Drew — Nancy and Max subsequently died of AIDS — formed AIDS Project Los Angeles. While they made sure not to include any mention of the offensive "G" word in that organization's title, they established a home for the gay men who were getting sick, providing a "buddy system," housing referrals and food for those too poor or

"L.A. just has the best attitude about AIDS."

How wrong they were. In a myth-making city so able to believe its own upbeat illusions, backward legislators ruled without dissent. Supervisor Pete Schabarum somehow got his hands on one of the safe-sex brochures and found them "pornographic." And he wasn't the only one. Schabarum won backing by everyone on the board (except Supervisor Ed Edelman) for a review of \$1 million in county contracts with gay agencies — even though the safe-sex campaign was being funded exclusively by private dollars and was targeted only to locales frequented by gay men, such as bars and baths. At an emotional hearing, Rice told Schabarum, "It wasn't intended for you," adding that "this information will save thousands of lives."

But Schabarum was unmoved. Less than a week earlier the supervisors had condemned another educational booklet that advised drug users to make sure their needles were clean. (In 1988, the supervisors, again with the exception of Edelman, rejected a proposal, unanimously backed by the County Commission on AIDS, to offer bleach and condom kits to L.A.'s drug users. They feared that this would encourage drug use. The decision infuriated minority leaders, who called the decision racist. According to Dr. German Maisonet, the most respected source on AIDS and recreational drug use in the minority communities, "They might as well have said 'drop dead' to my people.")

The controversy forced into the open an unprecedented public critique of how the board was handling AIDS education. Bruce Decker, a veteran Republican and one of Gov. George Deukmejian's AIDS advisers and his only openly gay appointee (he quit in October when Deukmejian came out for Prop. 102), called the supervi-

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sors' action "criminally negligent." Even the State Office of AIDS joined in the attack. In a vote of no-confidence, the state sent the \$1.25 million allocated to AIDS research and treatment directly to private AIDS agencies, rather than funneling the money through the county's Department of Health Services.

But Decker was in Sacramento, as was the State Office of AIDS. Years later, AIDS educator John Brown would ask, "How could L.A. have been so passive, allowing itself to be a wimpy punching bag to such continual aggression and incompetence?"

LA. DESPERATELY NEEDED some political leadership, but it would be another year before the necessary loudmouths would appear. In 1985, Los Angeles County claimed to have budgeted about \$10.3 million for AIDS-related efforts, but that was mostly state and federal pass-through money targeted for in-patient and out-patient care at county hospitals, with only about 10 percent going to education or prevention. (San Francisco supervisors, by contrast, had earmarked \$2.2 million for AIDS education alone, of which \$800,000 came from local funds.)

In 1984, responding to growing AIDS case loads, the county did open an AIDS Program Office (which, unlike the one in San Francisco, has no real power to initiate programs), and in March 1985 County/USC opened its AIDS out-patient clinic, known as "5P21," the number of the ward in which it is located. Although 5P21 had to handle only one-third of the number of PWAs accommodated in L.A. County in 1988, in about a year the clinic was already

glected by nurses too busy to spoon-feed them.

The seeds for aggressive community involvement in the dungeons of L.A. County/USC began with the divisive 1986 "No on 64" campaign against Lyndon LaRouche's initiative to quarantine people suspected of having AIDS. Instead of uniting the gay community, this campaign against the extreme political right underscored how irreconcilable were the needs of the corporate Westsiders ("Fight the proposition on issues of cost-effectiveness, not gay rights") with those of the more grassroots Eastsiders, who threw benefits in drag bars. But even within the grassroots wing, there were nasty breaches: while members from the Lavender Left were fighting to build a Rainbow-style coalition of gays, Latinos and blacks, Ivy Bottini's more mainstream contingent just wanted to "defeat the damn proposition." Bottini succeeded in ousting the more pro-active left-wing rabble-rousers.

Meanwhile, a group of Silver Lake residents decided to avoid the ugly infighting altogether and founded "Stop the AIDS Quarantine." Their greatest accomplishment was to stage a torchlight march on LaRouche's headquarters, an action that the tame "No on 64" leaders did everything in their power to prevent. Leaders called it "too angry and too gay," implying that they would see to it that no one attended.

Four thousand angry gays and lesbians showed up. For the first time in the six-year-long AIDS crisis, the local media had a clamoring demonstration it could slap on all the local TV news stations.

When the LaRouche initiative was defeated, the leaders of the torchlight drama — Michael Weinstein, Chris Brownlie, Phill Wilson, Mina Meyer and Paul Cole-

stration in front of Antonovich's house in Glendale, making sure to invite Mothers of AIDS Patients and a horde of Episcopal pastors from the Metropolitan Community Church (who knelt down on Antonovich's lawn and prayed for his soul). Weinstein, of course, made sure that the local TV stations, who considered Weinstein the best thing that had happened to AIDS in L.A., were standing by.

Overnight, Weinstein became L.A.'s most effective AIDS leader. He was the only figure who had ever stood up to the intransigent Board of Supervisors. Its other two conservatives, now sitting ducks for Weinstein's wrath, wasted no time in supporting the "sane and cost-effective approach of hospice care." So did Antonovich. The day after the march, Antonovich reneged on everything he had said and supported the notion of PWAs not dying on gurneys or in impoverished homes. (Since then, others, such as Ron Wolff, have opened hospices throughout L.A.) Two years later, he would help make hospice care a reality by allocating \$2 million for establishing hospices in L.A., nearly a quarter of that for the construction of the Chris Brownlie Hospice, named in honor of a living PWA. The land on which the 25-bed hospice would be built was donated by Barlow Hospital, located in a pastoral setting near Dodger Stadium. (It opens this week.) The community rejoiced at its first victory during the six years of a silent war.

THE DEMONSTRATION PROVIDED the AIDS community with overdue ammunition to fight recalcitrant legislators. But with activists rushing to this stockpile with lit matches, the community witnessed as many destructive explosions within its own circles as it had planned to create outside them.

do A. Torres reprimanded sup Schabarum and Antonovich, saying they had "abused their legal discretion."

Meanwhile, Arturo Olivas, one of the most outspoken gay voices in the L.A. AIDS community (and now executive director of Cara a Cara, a Latino AIDS education agency), threw caution to the wind and organized a silent protest at the hearing for fund-raising proposals. APLA had applied for a \$2.2 million grant, written without Latino community needs budgeted into the proposal. APLA, said Olivas, had "failed to address the issue and concerns unique to the Latino PWA, and had overlooked the special problems faced by the undocumented, the monolingual, and heterosexually transmitted PWAs like women and children." APLA responded to Olivas' criticism by hiring a Latino health educator, Daniel Lara, who now admits that he was placed at APLA as a stooge to undercut Olivas' efforts, not to effect any lasting change. (Lara eventually quit APLA.)

(APLA interim executive director Frank Paradise says now that "at the time no one had the vision to see the AIDS problem looming in the minority communities. Such an oversight would never happen now, considering the strong voices these communities have with Rev. Carl Bean and Arturo Olivas." Also, adds Paradise, who considers himself a close friend of Lara's, "Daniel not only did much good and helped elevate the level of discussion about minorities, he also set in place some very good educational programs. Not everyone was sympathetic to him, but he was a very good leader. I knew he was frustrated long before he left.")

But the most dramatic swerving in the AIDS community took place when the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT

PWAs accommodated in L.A. County in 1988, in about a year the clinic was already too small to handle the rapidly rising number of AIDS cases. Even those with Kaposi's sarcoma, who require bimonthly chemotherapy, have to face waits of up to five hours each visit. There are so few private examination rooms that patients get their IV-drip in the hall; the chemo is so immediately toxic that most patients vomit in public, gagging for as long as an hour. Dedicated doctors and nurses at 5P21 secretly admit that the overcrowding has gotten out of hand, referring to the six-week waiting period faced by a diagnosed PWA before he or she receives a clinic appointment.

In 1984, the board thought it was doing AIDS patients a favor by offering them their own out-patient ward. The notion of setting aside beds for an in-patient AIDS ward was "out of the question," hospital management told Health Commissioner Robert C. Gates, who claimed that "the county just did not have the financial resources." Although hospital management was aware that the AIDS ward in San Francisco General Hospital was considered a "financial miracle" and a nexus for community involvement, it was unwilling to shuffle existing monies and beds to convert one of the several empty wards into an AIDS unit. By late 1988, there would still be no AIDS-dedicated unit in a hospital that treats more AIDS patients than any medical facility in the world.

Ed Gillman, a former AIDS volunteer at County/USC, had to race all over the hospital to find his "guys." (He also often found them being harassed by "change ministries," or fundamentalist Christian sects that preyed on dying PWAs, urging these dying men to renounce their homosexuality or else be damned.) Eventually, Gillman was dismissed for talking openly about what he saw as the bureaucratic red tape that prevented volunteers like himself from feeding PWAs who were being ne-

— Michael Weinstein, Chris Brownlie, Phill Wilson, Mina Meyer and Paul Coleman — decided it was finally time for the gay community to do more than simply react to ongoing attacks, and to take on a positive leadership role in the AIDS crisis. On Feb. 16, 1987, they convened a blue ribbon commission hearing entitled "What Is Being Done To Care for Persons With AIDS?" The consistent message of those hearings was the need for alternatives to hospitalization, such as home and hospice care. Chris Brownlie and Michael Weinstein wanted to take up this cause of improving health care in the county and providing cost-effective alternatives to hospitalization, and they decided that the first step would be to identify the greatest obstacle.

They had a specific enemy in mind.

SUPERVISOR MIKE ANTONOVICH had made homophobic and racist comments that would have incensed a gay community more self-confident than L.A.'s. "AIDS is not the responsibility of the county," he proclaimed in 1985. "AIDS is the responsibility of those who engage in promiscuous homosexual acts or drug abuse." As if that weren't bigoted enough, he added that "the only way to stop AIDS is if gays would turn straight."

Weinstein's group, now called the AIDS Hospice Foundation, would not stand for such idiocy. They called a press conference at which they inducted Antonovich into the "AIDS Hall of Shame." Weinstein also made six proposals for improving health care in the county, including the opening of two more out-patient AIDS clinics.

When Antonovich rejected them and discounted allegations that the county was "treating AIDS like chicken pox," the organizers of the AIDS Hospice Foundation had a secret strategy up their sleeves. On March 26, 1987, they arranged a demon-

plosions within its own circles as it had planned to create outside them.

The AIDS community was bracing itself for a painful re-evaluation of its role. Gay journalist Richard Labonte was one of the first people to dare to criticize AIDS Project Los Angeles openly, writing that "L.A.'s passive stance in the face of the board's intolerable inaction is APLA's shame."

But it would be wrong just to single out APLA. At one time everyone had applauded APLA's role as a mammoth money machine because it seemed to offer the gay/AIDS community the semblance of a government-run headquarters it so lacked. What was happening now was a sense that most AIDS agencies — not just APLA — had bought into a "don't rock the boat" mentality that stressed competence over ideology. And in order to stay afloat, and to plan ahead for rising AIDS case loads, AIDS agencies had prioritized having a formidable infrastructure over setting in place a cozy homestead.

Still, gay people started to wonder why L.A.'s most prominent AIDS organization had placed fund-raising over advocacy. Groups like Being Alive were founded to watch AIDS agencies they had felt had grown too large to minister to PWAs effectively. Rev. Carl Bean changed the face of AIDS in L.A. by openly proclaiming his identity as a pro-sex gay black man, proudly recounting his history as a Motown singer who once cut a song with these lyrics: "I'm happy, I'm carefree, I'm gay/I was born this way."

"The Rev," as he's known to his flock, saw to it that blacks spurned by APLA had a sanctuary of their own to turn to. He founded Minority AIDS Project (MAP) in 1985 and even went so far as to sue the Board of Supervisors for failing to help gather and distribute money to minority communities. (The board retaliated by blocking a \$20,000 federal AIDS-education grant to MAP, for which Judge Ricar-

AIDS community took place when the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) made a home in L.A. This grassroots, democratic organization, dedicated to direct, militant action to change the gross inadequacies of the public and private sectors' responses to AIDS, forever changed L.A.'s traditionally passive way of dealing with and surviving AIDS. The city would never be the same.

WHILE WEINSTEIN WAS lambasting the supervisors, his private life had become a horror show. Friend and colleague Chris Brownlie, who had been complaining of severe flu symptoms for months, collapsed, gagging like a man drowning to death. Uninsured and without health benefits, Brownlie was rushed to County/USC, where doctors confirmed everyone's worst fears: he had *Pneumocystis carinii*, which meant he had AIDS. Yet he lay wasting away in a gurney in the holding room for three entire days and nights, being brought to despair by the Dante-esque groaning of the dying patients who surrounded him in the fluorescently lit corridors, all of them lying ignored in pools of their own waste matter, their life-sustaining treatments delayed until the hospital could accommodate more patients.

Seeing first-hand how dilapidated and mismanaged the county system was, Weinstein got on the phone and called Supervisor Ed Edelman, demanding as calmly as possible that Edelman "get Brownlie the hell out of there." In a matter of minutes, Brownlie was sucking up oxygen in a "real" bed, and Weinstein was mobilizing his forces again on Antonovich's Glendale lawn.

But Weinstein remembers asking himself one question over and over again: how could a community be convinced that it was more powerful than it dared to believe it could be?

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About that time, in May 1987, a few New Yorkers were asking the very same question. Larry Kramer was appalled to learn from a *New York Times* article that one in 61 babies in New York City was being born with AIDS antibodies. Sick and tired of the fact that gays were fighting the war against AIDS alone, he gathered about 200 young men and women; together, they descended on City Hall, acting out mock funerals, called "die-ins." This group went on to embarrass N.Y. Senator Alfonse D'Amato, Health Commissioner Stephen Joseph and Mayor Ed Koch. They called their group the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power. Their slogan was "Silence = Death." Their anger came

from the legacy of the Jews during the Holocaust, from remembering how no one had lifted a finger to help them.

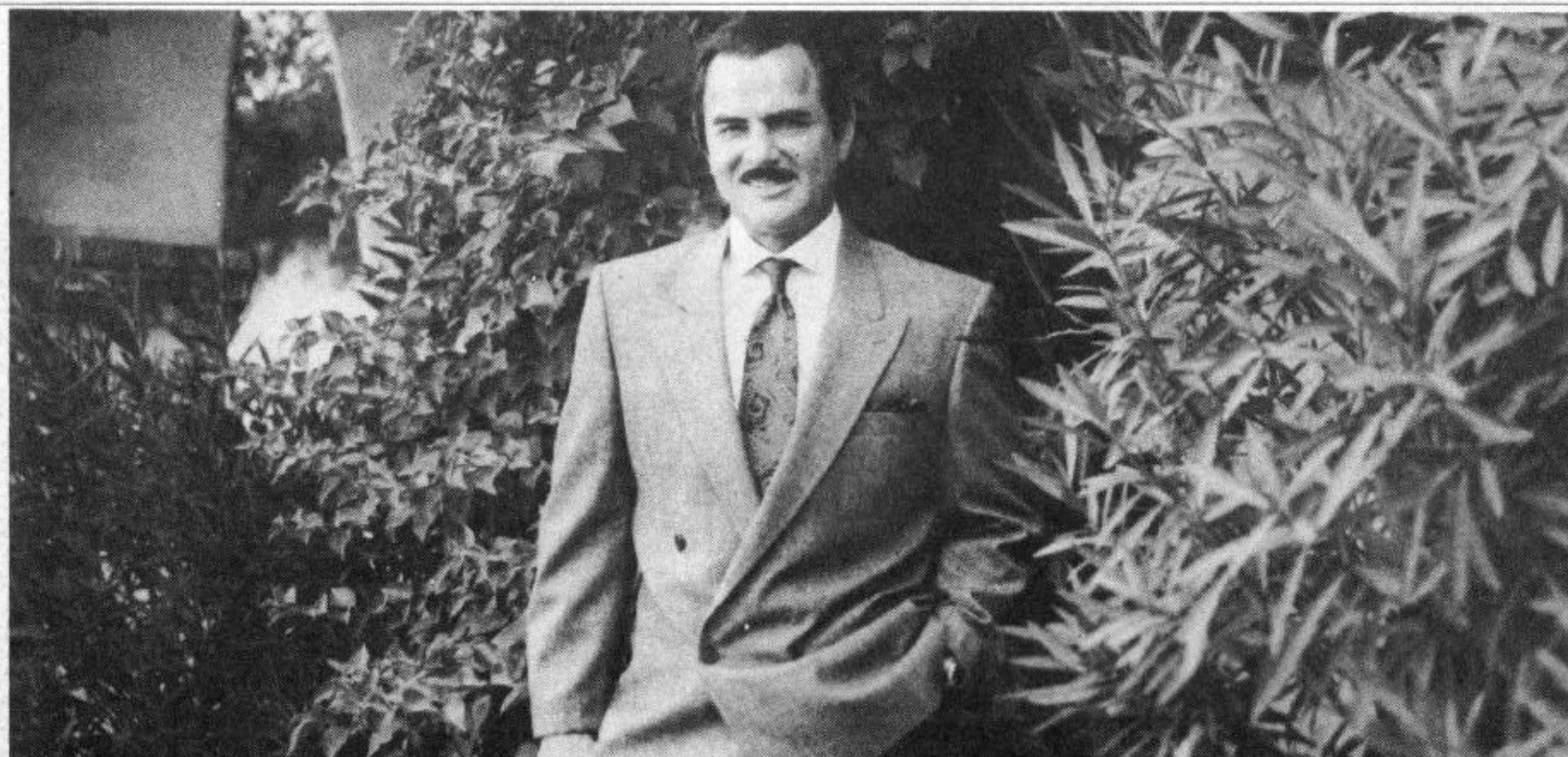
"Manhattan is our Dachau," Kramer, alone and ostracized, had screamed in 1983. But when he repeated his extremist call to arms four years later, others promptly joined him. The gay community had already been decimated — as were the ethnic communities; only now more attention was being drawn to the fact that almost half of all PWAs were *not* white, gay men. By 1988, 53 percent of all children with AIDS were black; 23 percent were Latine. Most of the women with AIDS were people of color. It seemed to those who were touched by AIDS that the world was simply letting them die.

PWAs directed their hatred at the Federal Drug Administration, because it was there that bureaucrats were hoarding the dozens of drugs that had a chance of slowing or even killing HIV. The scientific trials required before pharmaceuticals can be marketed in the United States take an average of nearly nine years — the equivalent of an eternity for PWAs. By 1988, the FDA had approved only AZT, the most expensive antiviral. All this led people to wonder if officials in the various labyrinths of government weren't in bed with the pharmaceutical companies. After all, the Community Research Initiative, run by New York City PWAs, had done its own experiments and was keeping people alive with much cheaper concoctions than those

the FDA saw fit to approve. Even Robert C. Gallo, a co-discoverer in 1985 of the virus that causes AIDS (who has never been considered a friend to the AIDS community), agreed with a recent congressional report that stated that "the absence of a clear mandate for urgent action from the highest levels of the administration . . . has had a direct negative impact on the effort to develop AIDS-related drugs." What's missing, he said, is a "wartime mentality."

ACT UP WOULD EVENTUALLY declare war. When it set up operations in L.A. in December 1987, 200 anxious young men and women trudged through stormy Hollywood streets to attend the first meeting. But when organizer Mark Kostopoulos spoke about "giving political expression to our anger" and "allowing ourselves to be arrested in order to save our lives," he received only lukewarm support from Southern Californians, who felt, in the words of one participant, that "love was missing from his words." It would take several months before mellow Angelenos allowed themselves to act as angry as they felt. It would take until election night before ACT Uppers would defy Sheriff's Department orders to stay on the sidewalks while demonstrating on Santa Monica Boulevard. ACT Uppers are livid over the passage of Prop. 96, Sheriff Block's so-called "victim's rights measure," which allows peace officers to order AIDS-antibody testing from anyone they claim has spit at them.

After a year of monthly actions, there isn't a single high-powered member of the gay elite — whether MECLA's Diane Himes or Morris Kight or Ivy Bottini or David Mixner — who doesn't applaud





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David Mixner — who doesn't applaud ACT UP's storming of the county Bastille, their marches on the FDA in Westwood, their initiation of an AIDS discourse (raising issues of passive genocide and the American democratic tradition allowing people to claim their sovereignty over government) and their collaboration with Michael Weinstein and Chris Brownlie to demand an AIDS-dedicated ward at County/USC.

ACT UP staged a sit-in inside County/USC (a.k.a. the "Colossus of State Street") last summer, and three ACT UP-ers were arrested. ACT UP eventually threatened the Board of Supervisors with escalated action if their demands were not met, pressing Health Commissioner Gates to reduce the time for presenting an AIDS-unit plan from six months to one month. (Gates agreed, but the moment ACT UP ceased its harassment and began annoying other institutions, County/USC settled back into its old "wait and see" patterns.)

What is happening in L.A.'s AIDS community is a vital echoing of the national mood of "AIDS empowerment," a movement that lurched into gear last year at the October Lesbian and Gay March on Washington that unfurled the massive quilt commemorating those who have died of AIDS. That movement gained momentum just last month, when thousands of activists from almost every state in the union besieged and effectively closed FDA headquarters, demanding quicker government action on AIDS-fighting drugs. In fact, sprouting up all over L.A. are ACT UP-style, but independent, AIDS guerrilla task forces.

One very powerful and anonymous affiliation, known only as "The Group," boasts an artistic character that's quite different from ACT UP's ill-mannered pushiness. Over the last months, this cadre of visual artists has covered L.A. with angry street

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graffiti. "The Group" can be spotted at every demonstration (including the one at Washington) by its finely crafted "hate banners" depicting the blood-hungry gullets of "AIDS monsters" Jesse Helms, Ronald Reagan, George Deukmejian and George Bush.

THE MONSTERS WERE NOT exclusively "straight." By 1988, angry activists would break a cardinal rule of the gay community and publicly ridicule the ogres in their own own back yard. Paralleling this national, cranky-activist mood, however, was some pain and ugliness. And painful questions were being

asked: Did gays have a death wish? Were agencies missing the single most important element of the health crisis in their dealings with clients — humanity? Was there any way to deal collectively and intellectually with all the pain, grief, blood and horror of this holocaust? Where was the AIDS guru? Why could the gay community not allow itself to experience as a community the profundity and drama of 30,000 young men gasping for air and dying like worms? Who was keeping this crisis from coming to a head?

The questions were compounded recently. A new era of self-criticism in L.A. began last June when APLA, L.A.'s most prominent AIDS organization, was publicly shamed. Three Latinos, including

Daniel Lara — the "stooge" hired by APLA in response to Olivas' 1986 protest — resigned after claiming that APLA had abandoned minorities. This protest was followed by an even more damning announcement that the agency was suffering from a \$1-million shortfall; the audit forced immediate cutbacks in client services. The gay community was in an uproar. How dare any agency as large as APLA betray the public trust and spend so much money on overhead rather than funnel such resources to needy PWAs?

According to Frank Paradise, who became director of APLA when its previous CEO John Wolfe, Ph.D., resigned during the crisis, "APLA has completely re-evaluated itself and its role in the com-

munity."

"Yes, we did go through a terrible crisis," Paradise adds. "But that led to a lot of internal examination. We came to grips with the reality that we had spent too much money in the wrong ways, and began streamlining and paring down, successfully returning to our original 'mission statement,' a commitment to serving PWAs. Over the years we were growing so fast that we lost focus on that mission. Management was preparing for the rising case loads in five years, but we decided that we didn't need such a big management level if it was going to detract from client services. And in the last few months, everyone from higher management has left."

Paradise explains that APLA has a \$12-million budget, and over the past few months they've streamlined costs so dramatically they've taken off \$170,000 in spending per month without impacting at all direct services to clients or education. "This organization will not be the same," he says. "We are very excited about the changes and about offering a symbol to the community of how an organization can reshape itself. We have some new people and some new ideas. And we will de-bureaucratize APLA, returning to our more grassroots origins, while also incorporating all we've learned about accountability and effectiveness. The crisis has been good for us all."

While the gay community was not essentially interested in bashing APLA (this summer saw the largest turnout ever for its annual fund-raising walkathon), the uproar forced others who work within AIDS agencies to take a reflective look within. What they found was not pretty.

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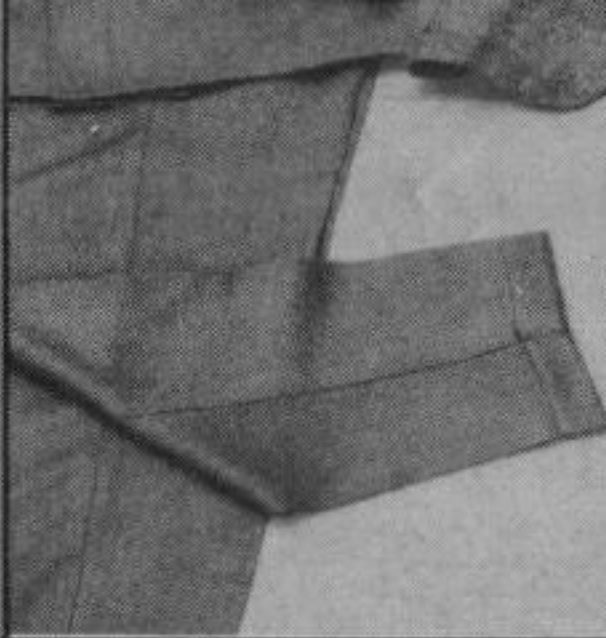
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pride in being who they are — pure life-force, unfettered by greed and ambition — and their down-to-earth survival agenda often contrasts with the capitalist instinct to build agencies and make them blossom through fund-raising and hyped public relations. These two strains within the community often seem to be tearing it apart. PWAs often seem proud of the example they provide as underdogs. In a nation gone so selfish, this role affords PWAs a sense of purity that appeals to an almost frontier-like spirit. A group like Being Alive was very happy to meet in the living room of its founder, Ron Rose, to be on the AIDS cutting edge, to be a watchdog demanding accountability and dignity from other organizations.

But like every other AIDS group founded in someone's living room, as its membership grew Being Alive was forced to grow into a full-fledged organization. They hired non-PWA Dave Johnson as director and fund-raiser, and he has become an effective voice in fighting political battles at County/USC. But some PWAs are disappointed with his eloquent and overly professional manner. They see Being Alive on its way of becoming another APLA, marginalizing and even ostracizing PWAs still loyal to Being Alive's initial home-grown activist goals. Dave Johnson and President Scott Berry (who hired him) discount such voices of dissent, implying that this newly emerging activist spirit threatens to blow open a Pandora's box that could hurt Being Alive's leverage in collaborating with other AIDS agencies to fight the "real" enemies: the FDA and the health care system.

"Perhaps there is a negative side to positive action," muses leader Morris Kight, who explains that, due to governmental apathy, AIDS agencies have had to adopt the position of "evil bureaucracy" and "homey refuge" simultaneously, adding

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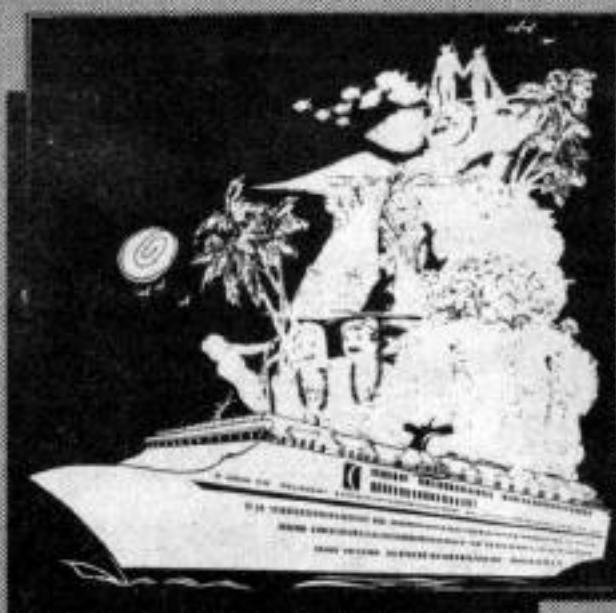
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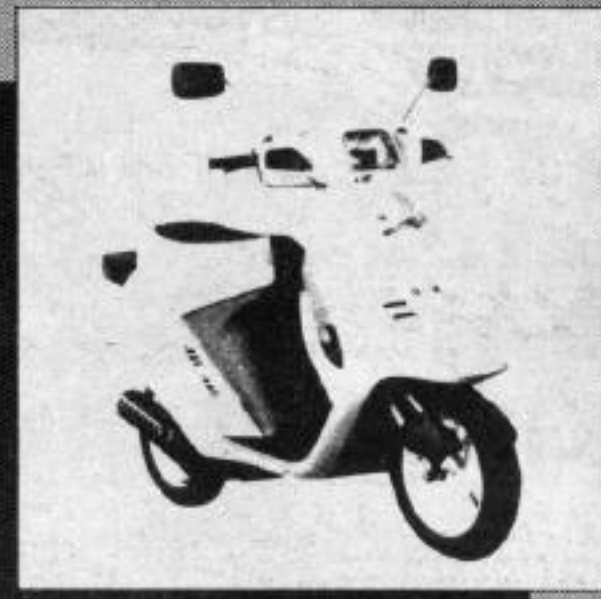
that "we may no longer be able to occupy the roles of big government *and* community spirit." The problem, as he sees it, "is that we are just now learning how to voice our rage with this system and the disease which created it, and unfortunately we aim our arrows at our own family." Knight hopes that eventually the AIDS community will "strike a balance between being outspoken and being unnecessarily hurtful, and [that] we will once again join hands."

FAT CHANCE. VOICES WITHIN the ethnic communities eschew such easy optimism. The self-criticism is not only long overdue, they argue, it's necessary for building a multicultural coalition. The Minority AIDS Project has been hailed by everyone in the AIDS community for alarming black politicians such as Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, Assemblywoman Maxine Waters and State Senator Diane Watson, along with such recording artists as Patti LaBelle, Gladys Knight, Natalie Cole and Dionne Warwick, into putting AIDS among their top priorities. (All of these figures participated in MAP's ground-breaking fund-raiser last summer at the Shrine Auditorium.) But Cleo Manago, who used to work at MAP and now is a health educator at the Watts Health Foundation, is angered by what he sees as MAP's appointment by the white power structure as "messiah to blacks."

Manago feels that "shoving money at MAP" — MAP's budget for 1985 was \$40,000; four years later, its budget grew to nearly \$500,000 — satisfies the gnawing "guilt that white gay folks have about us ghetto people," and adds that greater efforts must be mounted to educate blacks in Compton and Watts who are still think

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Compton and Watts who are still think AIDS only affects "white fags." His point, echoed by Dr. German Maisonet, is that no single agency can reach the black community; local governments must chip in. (Many black health-care workers seem to have a gripe with the major AIDS agencies, flinging defamatory terms such as "AIDS pimp" and "walking opportunistic infection" around to criticize people they feel are into AIDS work for the lucrative jobs and prestigious positions it can offer — especially to the people of color who may have never worked in a mainstream agency before.)

The difficulty of educating the ethnic communities about AIDS is further compounded by the unwillingness among non-gay black and Latino leaders to talk about sex. Most prefer to believe that blacks and Latinos get AIDS primarily through IV-drug use. Eunice Diaz, an outspoken member of the county Commission on AIDS, says that a "Latino family would rather die a thousand deaths than confront their son's homosexuality."

At a recent preview of KCET's landmark Latino-targeted documentary *SIDA Is AIDS*, Olivas called attention to the fact that genuine discussion of homosexuality was completely omitted from the hourlong show. "What kind of message does that send to the man who lives with his wife but plays around with guys on the side?" he asked. Producer Sylvia Morales dismissed those charges by calling Olivas "a militant gay man." Others in the audience who felt deeply betrayed walked out, grumbling about how, with such censorship, the show had done more harm than good.

The same kind of responses have been coming from the black community. The first conference of black leaders to deal with AIDS took place just last month at

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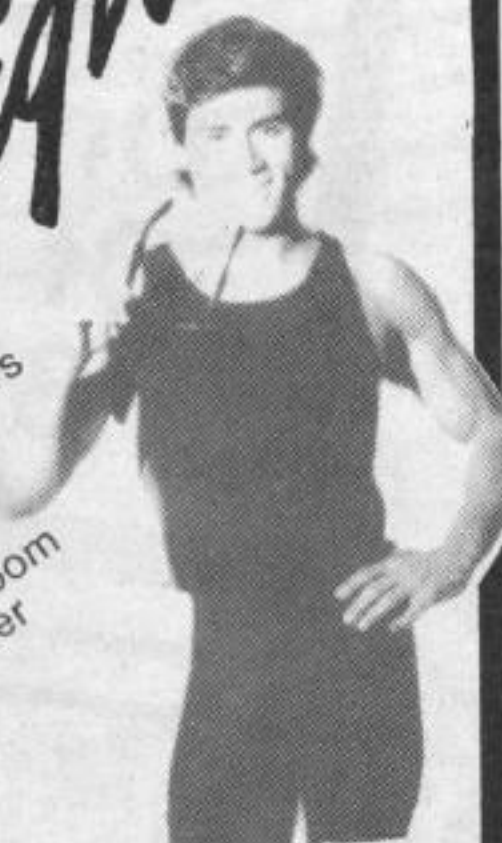
HISTORY *continued from page 22*

USC's Afro-American Museum; it was called by Assemblywoman Waters. There was no PWA at the conference and no openly gay man on the panel. Dr. Maisonet was overlooked by Waters because, according to Maisonet, "I'm openly gay." Yet Waters assailed her own people for being five years behind the times. "As a legislator I will help you get money, but you must not rely on me to educate you," she pleaded, her voice cracking. "Do it quick. People are dying in our community."

Her words may have had an impact on those new to the AIDS community, but veteran activists felt humiliated and ignored. Many leaders believe that the inherent slavishness of people who have been oppressed all their lives — whether they are gay, black or Latino — has infiltrated their way of doing business with each other. ("If they ever find out I'm lesbian, no black hospital administrator or black doctor will talk to me, although my identity doesn't bother my clients," declared one high-powered AIDS expert who asked to remain anonymous.) "It's hard enough for black people to respect black people without AIDS," added Christine Tripp from MAP. "Compound our oppression with the omnipresent threat of death," muses Phill Wilson, a black health educator, "and this infighting and shame of working with one another makes profound sense. It's our cross to bear."

But leaders such as Carl Bean, Chris Brownlie and Michael Weinstein attribute what they call "the recent AIDS madness" to something much simpler. "We are grieving, and we haven't found the community outlet for it, because a basic sense of passion is missing here in L.A.," Brownlie said. "When you are first diagnosed [with full-blown AIDS], you see the

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nosed [with full-blown AIDS], you see the drama of life as you never have before. You are so moved by what you are going through that you transcend, for a moment, your pain. But as a community we have not found the rigor, the intellectual power, the passion or the communal grief to see AIDS for what it is. And all of our agencies are failing, all of them are wasting away, because a goddamned bureaucratic stranglehold over the essential humanity, the beautiful stinking humanity, of all this death and dying keeps the APLA and Shanti and MAP from administering to us the way they ought to. AIDS is a typically American epidemic — where else could it have been allowed to spread this way? — but Americans don't understand, aren't moved enough by the horror to transcend its immediacy, to cry out openly and miserably for what we have lost, and then create a memorial engraved in our activism for those precious, precious, precious men and women, cut off in their prime, who we have lost and who we will continue to lose."

Others have more prosaic theories. The community is in a confusing limbo. According to Being Alive medical adviser Dr. Mark Katz, the AIDS community has been told to prepare for the best — a truly effective treatment (such as the promising CD4, which tricks HIV into attacking it rather than a human cell, or Peptide T, or the Salk Vaccine or the Typhoid Vaccine with which Maisonet's patients are having much success, which seems to boost the body's ability to fight HIV) that will completely reshape AIDS in the next year. But the AIDS community has also been told to expect the worst — an AIDS hurricane as compared to the current drizzle. Katz put the issue simply: "We don't know whether to panic or rejoice."

continued on page 66

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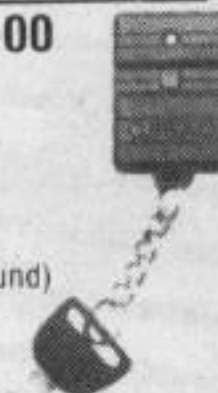
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HISTORY *continued from page 63*

Until it's clear which way fate will direct L.A.'s AIDS community, leaders from many of L.A.'s AIDS organizations have banded together in a political vehicle called United AIDS Coalition. Yet another subgroup — composed of West Hollywood City Councilman Stephen Schulte, Arturo Olivas, Phill Wilson, Chris Brownlie, Michael Weinstein and Joyce Green — are no longer *just* applying pressure to the County Board of Supervisors. These activists have a new target — they have taken their war cry to Mayor Tom Bradley.

"The city of L.A. has largely abdicated responsibility for AIDS," says Jim Dionisio of APLA, "because health care is the county's domain." He argues that there's much in the way of "legal and handicap services — not to mention direct grants to agencies and individuals — the city could offer if it were as committed as it says it is."

In 1985, Mayor Bradley shamed the supervisors by pushing for city-wide AIDS antidiscrimination legislation. But the ordinance has been difficult to enforce. By the time the mayor's office gets around to answering a complaint, the PWA issuing it has often died.

A FEW WEEKS AGO, A FEW AIDS warriors sat quietly in the audience during the monthly County AIDS Commission hearings. Almost simultaneously, a couple of hundred Angelenos from every walk of life in L.A. (from the classy Diane Himes and the legendary Morris Kight to the boisterous members of ACT UP) were flying to Washington to protest the FDA's paralyzing slowness in releasing AIDS drugs.

While local leaders sat through the commission's dull minutes, Mark Kostopoulos could be seen on TV being dragged away by the Maryland police, screaming at the top of his lungs at the cameras, "Please help us! We're dying!" At the end of the commission hearing, Michael Weinstein approached the panel and essentially said the same thing.

The panel members shifted nervously in their seats as Weinstein — never one to mince words — spoke, trying to touch their humanity. Sitting on the panel were such sympathetic people as Eunice Diaz, Rabbi Allen Freehling and openly gay Judge

Rand Schrader. But there were also those who have been nothing less than hostile. "We want to plan for this AIDS hurricane," Weinstein said, "and while we recognize that we can't do it without you, you can't really do it effectively without us. We ask you to allow us to help you. We demand it."

It was an emotional moment. When the hearing was adjourned, Eunice Diaz approached Chris Brownlie, the only PWA in the audience, and hugged him. A few days later, she would wonder "how Chris Brownlie hangs on the way he does, what with all the political aggravation we've put

him through." She mused that he is a "walking miracle," and added that he is proof of the triumph of the community over the weaknesses of the system.

But Brownlie was not interested in the praise. During the following days he could be seen racing all around town, meeting with Being Alive and ACT UP and County/USC officials, being hugged and grabbed and kissed and flirted with by the various honchos of the AIDS community who have grown to see him not just as their inspiration, not just as their skinny ambassador without a portfolio, but as a symbol for a new day. ■

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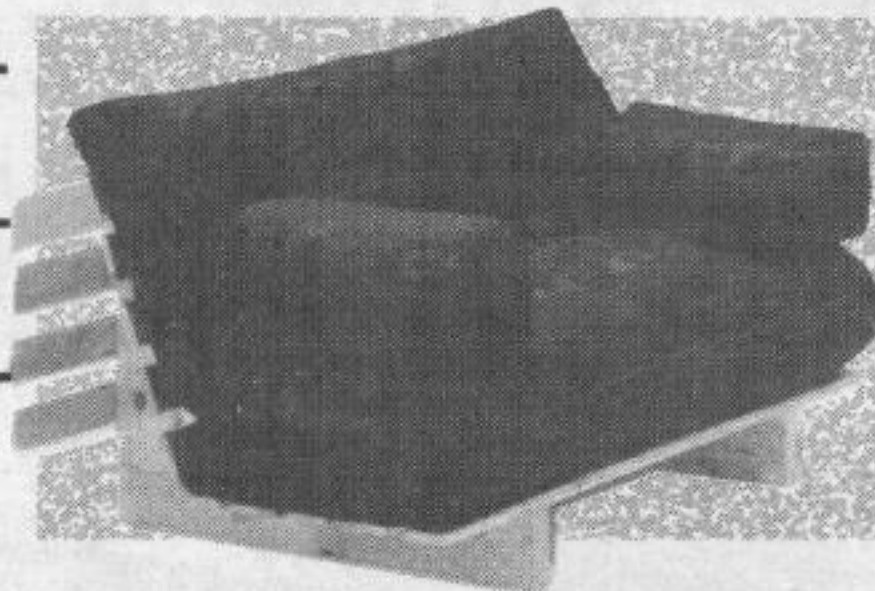
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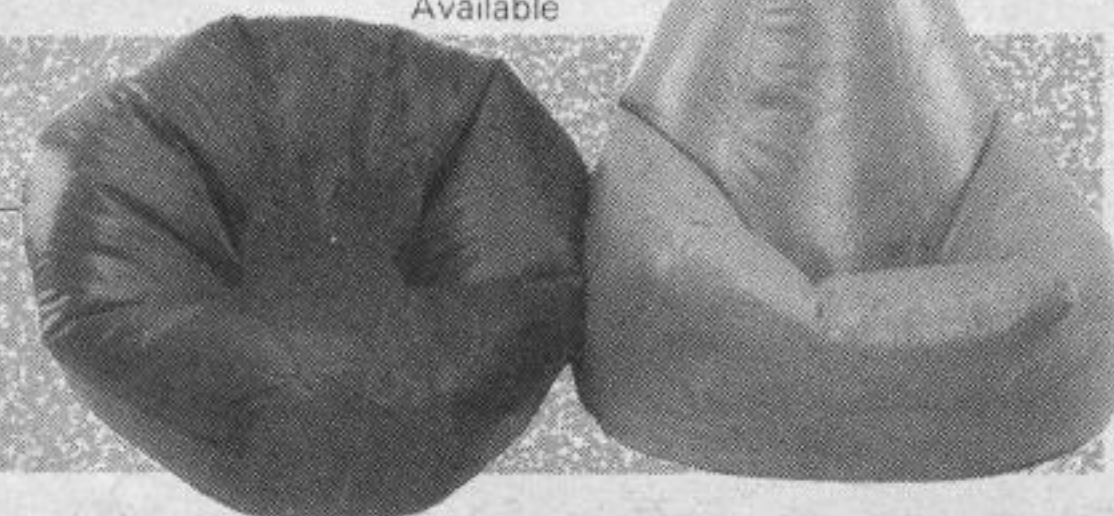
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