

THE 30 YEARS' WAR



KEVIN M. CATHCART

AIDS IS STILL A GLOBAL CATASTROPHE, IN LARGE PART BECAUSE OF THE HIGH WALLS OF IGNORANCE, STIGMA AND SILENCE THAT SURROUND IT

IT IS HARD TO KNOW WHAT TO DO

with the knowledge that we are about to reach the 30th anniversary of the Center for Disease Control's first report of what would come to be called AIDS.

We remember all those we have lost, celebrate the advances in treatment that keep many of our friends alive, and cheer the legal victories that fight discrimination. But how should we feel about the challenges that remain? Should we boil over with anger that so many died—and are still dying—so young? That in this country men who have sex with men, particularly in communities of color, still get HIV at alarming rates? That more than 33 million people live with HIV worldwide? That ignorance and discrimination still surround HIV? That we have not gotten our government or any other to act strongly enough to try to end the epidemic?

Should we fight the frustration that comes from watching the LGBT civil rights movement move further away from HIV-related work every year, despite the epidemic's overwhelming impact on our communities?

I have all of these reactions, all at the same time. Plus the questions: How many more people will die in the coming year? How many more will be infected? What can we do to turn this around?

In the early 80's I was a law student in Boston, active in gay community politics, when we first heard of the disease—at first without a name, then called GRID, finally AIDS. In the beginning we heard stories from New York and California and it felt—falsely—like there was some distance. But by the end of 1982 HIV was part of life for gay men in New England in ways we could not deny.

I started doing LGBT civil rights work full time at Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (GLAD) in 1984, which already had an AIDS Law Project, run pro bono by my good friend Steve Ansolabehere. By then Lambda Legal had already successfully litigated the first AIDS discrimination case in the country, in 1983, defending a doctor who treated people with AIDS when the co-op building where he had his office tried to evict him to keep people with the disease from coming into its lobby.

At GLAD we saw a steady stream of employment discrimination, denial of medical and dental care, and insurance issues. We tried to address ignorance and fear that often bordered on hysteria. In those days, before the HIV test or any truly useful treatments, no one knew who would get sick next. Steve was diagnosed with a rare form of avian tuberculosis in 1985. The hospital made us wear masks to visit him because there was no way to know whose immune system was compromised and whose wasn't. Two years later, I sat with him in the hospital and held his hand while he died. Every gay man of my generation has stories like this to tell. To those who are young enough to have missed this: Count your blessings. And use condoms.

Decades later, despite far greater understanding of the virus and a range of treatments, AIDS is still a global catastrophe, in large part because of the high walls of ignorance, stigma and silence—not to mention homophobia, racism, and the lack of access to care for low-income people—that surround it.

When the epidemic began, we at Lambda Legal amended our mission statement to explicitly include people with HIV and created our HIV Project, because the legal needs have always been—and continue to be—enormous (see "Positive History," page 10). In April, we filed a friend-of-the-court brief in the case of a man who allegedly bit his neighbor and was charged with violating a Michigan bioterrorism statute (the bioterrorism charge was thrown out). Last September, we reached a settlement in the case of Dr. Robert Franke, a retired minister and university provost kicked out of an assisted-living facility because he had HIV. And last month, we reached a resolution in our lawsuit on behalf of Melody Rose, a Wisconsin woman refused surgery because of her HIV status. Scientific consensus has long held that the risk of transmitting HIV from biting, delivering medical care or living with someone with HIV is virtually nil. "Victories" like these are resounding proof that an anniversary like this can't be celebrated. It calls for redoubled action by all of us.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Kevin M. Cathcart". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "K" and "C".