

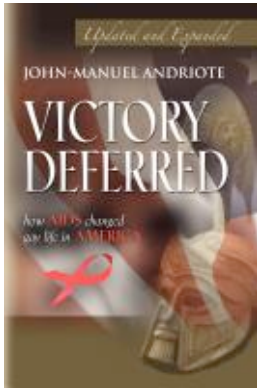
Updated and Expanded

JOHN-MANUEL ANDRIOTE

VICTORY DEFERRED

*how AIDS changed
gay life in AMERICA*





Based on hundreds of original interviews and extensive research, Victory Deferred chronicles the impact of the AIDS epidemic in the United States on the nation's hard-hit gay community. The book shows how AIDS transformed individual lives and major medical institutions, and built the gay civil rights movement.

Victory Deferred

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S e c o n d E d i t i o n
UPDATED AND EXPANDED

JOHN-MANUEL ANDRIOTE

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ISBN 978-1-61434-283-0

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Published in the United States by Booklocker.com, Inc., Bangor, Maine.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2011

Second Edition (Updated and Expanded)

THIRTY-EIGHT

“People with AIDS are dying!” shouted the heckler from the 1,500-member black-tied, evening-gowned audience at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Washington, D.C. “Sit down!” yelled others in the audience. They weren’t yelling at the speaker on stage but at the gay man among them who’d had the temerity to shout his rage. Was it Larry Kramer heckling Ronald Reagan’s first speech on AIDS in 1987? Hardly. This was an orgy of mutual admiration. “We love you, Bill!” erupted repeatedly from the crowd who’d paid hundreds to see and hear Bill Clinton become the first sitting president ever to address a gay rights group when he spoke on Saturday night, November 18, 1997, at a \$300,000 Human Rights Campaign fundraising dinner. Clinton once again warmed gay hearts—as he’d done in his first campaign, if rarely afterward—by quoting his predecessor Harry Truman’s speech to the NAACP fifty years earlier, vowing equality for all Americans. “And when I say all Americans,” Truman said, “I mean all Americans.” Clinton added, “Well, my friends, all Americans still means *all* Americans.”

With his trademark political panache, Clinton addressed—and dismissed—his heckler. “People with AIDS *are* dying,” he said. “But since I’ve become president, we’re spending ten times as much per fatality on people with AIDS as people with breast cancer or prostate cancer. And the drugs are being approved more quickly. And a lot of people are living normal lives. We just have to keep working on it.” The audience gave him one of many standing ovations.¹

Applause was the furthest thing from the minds of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS a month later when it issued a “progress report” that harshly condemned the Clinton administration’s efforts on AIDS. After beginning by saying that, yes, Clinton had been the first president “to take serious action to address the AIDS crisis,” the thirty-member

VICTORY DEFERRED

council said the administration “has sometimes failed to exhibit the courage and political will needed to pursue public health strategies that are politically difficult but that have been shown to save lives.” In particular, said the group, federal prevention efforts were still ignoring recommendations to provide “frank, explicit, culturally relevant HIV prevention information to those at risk for sexual transmission.” Like the Reagan and Bush administrations, the council said the Clinton administration “has failed to lay out a coherent strategic plan of action.” The report noted that upcoming measures of the administration’s commitment on AIDS would include its proposed AIDS budget for 1999 and its actions on needle exchange as a prevention measure for the ever-growing number of injection drug users at risk for infection or infecting a needle-sharing partner.²

The president’s proposed 1999 budget indeed offered increased funding for AIDS programs, a total of \$3.9 billion for AIDS research and services—a \$314 million increase over 1998. Of that amount, \$1.3 billion would go for the Ryan White CARE Act services, a 14 percent increase. Another \$385.5 million, a 35 percent increase, would be allocated for the AIDS Drug Assistance Program. The federal AIDS housing program would increase 10 percent, from \$204 million to \$225 million. And the National Institutes of Health would receive an additional \$124 million for AIDS research, bringing its share of the AIDS budget to \$1.731 billion. As for HIV prevention, Clinton proposed to increase the CDC’s HIV prevention budget by \$5 million, for a total of \$637 million. In actual fact, the increase wasn’t even for AIDS prevention per se but for a special program aimed at curtailing inequities in health care for minority communities. Nevertheless, Clinton’s AIDS policy advisor, AIDS “czar” Sandra Thurman said, “This is a statement by the president that the resolve to ending this terrible epidemic remains firm.”³

The firmness of the president’s resolve was called seriously into question only two months later when Clinton stunned Thurman, his secretary of Health and Human Services, his own HIV/AIDS council, AIDS advocates, and scientists alike

PART 10

when he unexpectedly announced on April 20 that, despite scientific evidence that needle exchange programs help to curb the spread of HIV among drug users, federal funding could not be used to support such programs. Although Health and Human Services Secretary Donna E. Shalala, like most of the administration's senior health officials, had argued that funding needle-exchange programs made sense, Clinton's political heart went with Barry R. McCaffrey, the retired general who headed the Office of National Drug Control Policy. McCaffrey persuaded Clinton that funding needle-exchange programs would open the administration to criticism that it was "soft on drugs." So Clinton declared that—despite findings from the National Institutes of Health that the programs were effective in reducing the spread of HIV, and despite the endorsement of the AMA and the National Academy of Sciences—they would have to get along without the federal government's support.⁴ Dr. R. Scott Hitt, the openly gay physician who chaired the president's HIV/AIDS council, said, "At best this is hypocrisy. At worst, it's a lie. And no matter what, it's immoral."⁵ The *New York Times* said, "Instead of making a principled decision, President Clinton is fecklessly trying to appease conservatives with a policy that will cost thousands of lives."⁶

Some things never really seem to change in America, no matter which politician occupies the Oval Office. Ironically, just a year before Clinton had challenged the American scientific community to make an AIDS vaccine its "first great triumph of the twenty-first century."⁷ As it had done since Reagan was president, politics once again trumped science when it came to preventing the further spread of HIV, if it meant upsetting conservative moralists.

As federal HIV prevention efforts remained captive to politics and gay politicians patted one another on the back for landing the president at their exclusive dinner, ordinary gay people were as hated and persecuted as ever. The number of gay men and lesbians discharged from the military was higher than ever under Clinton's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which the president had intended to allow gay members to serve so

VICTORY DEFERRED

long as they “kept quiet” about their sexual orientation.⁸ Nineteen states still had laws against sodomy, selectively enforced against gay men.⁹ A study of high school students found that more than one-third of them had “missed school because of fear for their safety” in the previous thirty days.¹⁰

Another study found that while middle-class Americans prided themselves on their nonjudgmentalism, they didn’t hesitate to call gay people “sick,” “perverted,” and “mentally ill.” An August 1998 *Newsweek* poll found that while most nongay Americans said gay people deserved equal rights in housing and jobs (83 percent and 75 percent, respectively), 54 percent believed homosexuality was a “sin.”¹¹

As the president of the United States answered questions from a grand jury about his own sexual behavior, the radical right exploited Americans’ ambivalence about homosexuality to inject their particular brand of poison into the national debate. Never ones to miss a chance to show that behind their so-called “Christian love” was a frightening, even fascistic, level of fear-driven hate, a coalition of conservative groups—including the Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council—launched a high-profile campaign in the summer of 1998 aimed at portraying gay people as sick perverts who could be “healed” through prayer and counseling. Hoping to pressure Republicans to toe their line as the November elections approached, the group sponsored newspaper ads quoting none other than the Senate majority leader, Trent Lott (R-Mississippi), who in June had likened gay people to alcoholics and kleptomaniacs.¹²

Across the country, the *Washington Blade* reported, “Gays are on the defense in matters of marriage and family issues, and on the offense in trying to secure basic protections against discrimination and violence.” Despite a drop in serious crimes across the country, reported incidents of hate crimes based on sexual orientation actually rose 8 percent from 1996 to 1997, according to the FBI.¹³

In the rarefied air of the Human Rights Campaign’s offices, things didn’t seem that bleak. Heady from a sense of “power” from their evening with the president, HRC announced in

PART 10

early 1998 that, together with the Metropolitan Community Churches, they would sponsor a fourth national gay civil rights march on Washington in the spring of 2000. Shirking the consensus-building among gay community organizations that had gone into planning the three previous national marches, the “Millennium March on Washington for Equal Rights” was viewed by many national gay and lesbian activists as a power grab by HRC director Elizabeth Birch, a ploy to increase HRC’s membership toward Birch’s stated goal of one million members by 2000. Words like “self-aggrandizing” were used as often as “effective” in describing Birch, and her own words at times seemed to betray her—as in a 1998 profile in *Out*, which quoted her as saying, “Imagine what you would have done if three years ago you woke up and found that someone had handed you the movement.”¹⁴ But most gay activists, who for years had lamented their lack of a charismatic individual to focus and lead the gay civil rights movement—as Martin Luther King, Jr., had done for African-Americans—weren’t quite as ready to anoint Birch as she herself seemed to be. Just as AIDS service organizations did with their arguments about the “needs” of people with AIDS, Birch sometimes conflated her organization’s interests with those of “all” gay people.

Robin Tyler, a lesbian comedian and events promoter hired by HRC and MCC to “produce” the Millennium March, asserted that HRC enjoyed the support of the “overwhelming majority” of gay people in the U.S. Although no one has ever produced a reliable measure of the number of gay people in this country, it seems reasonable to say there are many more than the two hundred thousand—mostly white, more-affluent-than-not—who made up HRC’s membership at the time it announced plans for the march. Nevertheless, said Tyler, “If there’s anything we’ve learned from the nineties it’s that the majority of this movement is mainstream. You can’t deny this and there’s nothing wrong with this.”¹⁵

Gay people were certainly brought further into the mainstream of American popular culture in the nineties, even if they were still reviled, discharged, arrested for having sex,

VICTORY DEFERRED

and otherwise treated like strangers in their own homeland. “Lesbian and gay figures are becoming commonplace in mainstream media,” wrote gay reporter David W. Dunlap in a 1996 *New York Times* article. “And established institutions are growing less timid in courting gay and lesbian audiences.” Dunlap added that capitalism—the power of the almighty American dollar and the chance to tap into the alleged affluence of gay Americans—was a likely explanation for this growing interest in the gay “market.”¹⁶

Not everyone welcomed the increasing “assimilation” of gay people. In the purplest prose and most sweeping of generalizations, Daniel Harris lamented in *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* that acceptance of gay people into the American mainstream meant the loss of an “ethnic” subculture as bitchy camp humor and the sense of always being an “outsider” gave way to what he saw as the bourgeois banality that characterized the mainstream. “The end of oppression,” wrote Harris, “necessitates the end of the gay sensibility.”¹⁷

Indeed, change was afoot. Even the stodgy *New York Times* had finally begun referring to homosexuals as “gay.” Movie studios were producing more gay-themed movies than ever, even if they were still serving up gay stereotypes. Gay New York City police officers in 1996 marched for the first time in the city’s gay pride parade, nearly three decades after the police raided the Stonewall Inn and set off a more active and visible gay civil rights movement.¹⁸ Arch-nemesis of the seventies Anita Bryant was now selling copies of her gospel-music cassette, “I Am What I Am” in the lobby of her Anita Bryant Theater, in Branson, Missouri. When she wrote the song, Bryant said, she had never heard Jerry Herman’s song of the same name—the defiant showstopper sung by a drag queen in the musical *La Cage aux Folles*.¹⁹ In 1997, then-closeted lesbian comedian Ellen DeGeneres came out on her show *Ellen* and the mainstream media couldn’t get enough of the spectacle. The gay media that year lost a pioneering voice, the community’s earliest source of information about AIDS, which had later lost all credibility by championing the most

PART 10

outlandish explanations of the disease, when the *New York Native* ceased publication.²⁰

In 1998, gay people were still on America's mind—and even stirred Americans' hearts. When Wyoming college student Matthew Wayne Shepard was savagely beaten and left tied to a rail fence to die alone on a cold October night, front-page news headlines, outraged gay people, clergy, and even elected officials joined their voices in denouncing the violence against gay people. The *New York Times* editorialized on 17 October, the day of Shepard's funeral, "It is a murder that seems to have aroused the deepest sympathies of the nation, a case in which law, religion, love, dignity and politics all seem on the side of a dead young man. It is a rare moment, and politicians and preachers had better take a lesson."

In such a state of flux, perhaps it was natural that disagreement erupted once again among urban gay men about what it "means" to be gay. In arguments that harkened back to the seventies, a handful of gay academics and porn stars calling themselves "SexPanic!" claimed—like John Rechy's "sexual outlaw" of the 1960s—that promiscuity is the essence of gay culture. One SexPanic! member, Rutgers University English professor Michael Warner, said, "It is an absurd fantasy to expect gay men to live without a sexual culture when we have almost nothing else that brings us together."²¹

On the other side were prominent gay writers including Gabriel Rotello, Michelangelo Signorile, and Larry Kramer, demonized by SexPanic! as "neo-conservatives." In an op-ed article in the *New York Times*, Kramer wrote, "Promiscuous gay men must hear the message, 'Enough already! Haven't you learned anything from the last seventeen years?'" He added, "Fortunately, more and more gay people are beginning to realize that it's time to redefine what it means to be gay. Allowing sex-centrism to remain the sole definition of homosexuality is now coming to be seen as the greatest act of self-destruction."²² Kramer's commonsense message was the same as it had been in *Faggots*—and he was still being reviled for it.

VICTORY DEFERRED

If Rip Van Winkle had fallen asleep in 1978, when *Faggots* was published and Kramer was vilified for daring to challenge the gay “norm” of promiscuity, and had then awakened to the arguments of SexPanic! twenty years later, he could have easily overlooked the fact that hundreds of thousands of gay men had died horrific deaths because of a sexually transmitted disease. On the eve of the AIDS epidemic, Edmund White, a forbear of SexPanic!, said that for gay men at that point there were “few ways besides sex to feel connected with one another.” Without knowing how prophetic his words would be, White added that “in the future there might be surer modes for achieving a sense of community.”²³

Nothing was surer than the devastation of the AIDS epidemic.

Not only did SexPanic! flout the epidemiologic facts of AIDS, but it ignored the fact that gay men because of the epidemic shared so much more than a priapic brotherhood of sexual rebellion insisting on a dubious “right” to promiscuity. Despite the many ways that gay people across the United States banded together to care for their own, and to preserve the memories of the community’s terrors and triumphs, some continued to question the legitimacy of describing the nation’s millions of gay men and lesbians as a genuine “community.” But as overused a term as it has become by its application to groups of people who share even the vaguest of commonalities, gay people could indeed consider themselves a community by virtue of their sharing a profound experience and responding together to address it.

In *Habits of the Heart*, sociologist Robert N. Bellah and his colleagues observed that genuine communities are such because they share a past and look together to the future. “For this reason,” note the authors, “We can speak of a real community as a ‘community of memory,’ one that does not forget its past.” In order not to forget that past, they said, a community continually retells its story, “its constitutive narrative,” offering examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community. Besides tying us to the past by reminding us of our shared

PART 10

history, they said, genuine communities “turn us toward the future as communities of hope.”²⁴

In the mid-nineties, I asked five individuals who played pivotal roles in gay America’s response to AIDS to reflect on the hard work and terrible cost of becoming a *genuine* community, a community of memory and hope. Cleve Jones, who marched with Harvey Milk and created the AIDS Memorial Quilt, said simply, “I think what we did mattered and I think we did the right thing. Even with all the mistakes, stupidity, and suffering, I’m still proud of it.”²⁵ Rodger McFarlane, whose personal phone line became the hotline that was the first AIDS service ever offered in the world, said, “Most people don’t have a sense of their own power. They don’t realize that one queen stepping outside a hospital administrator job and doing something different can make history.” He added, “We made history and changed the lives of millions of people just by stepping out from our own roles.”²⁶ Speaking of the AIDS services created and provided by the gay community, National Minority AIDS Council director Paul Kawata said, “I think the infrastructure that we built as gay men while we lost what we lost was extraordinary, heroic, unfathomable—and our legacy.”²⁷

Ginny Apuzzo, who told Congress in 1983 that the government’s \$14.5 total AIDS budget should be increased to \$100 million, offered her own political vision in describing the political implications of the gay community’s experience with AIDS. “In this country, this movement will prevail,” she said. “If we hang in there, where civil rights and human rights are concerned across the board, and go for the generic issue of oppression, then we can make a difference, and we will prevail, and we will make the country a better place. I think that we are this country’s last, best hope because no other group has representatives in every corner of the oppressed world in this country. We cross every line.”²⁸

Gay people would continue to fill important roles in addressing the epidemic as it surged on into the new millennium. In the broader arena of social and cultural life, we would witness in our words and deeds to the losses and the

VICTORY DEFERRED

possibilities that constituted our experience of the AIDS epidemic. To accomplish this, a clarity of vision and certainty of purpose would be the important second steps, behind the willingness to serve. "It's a war," said Reggie Williams. "It is a fucking war, and it has affected so many people's lives, taken so many precious, beautiful, talented people away from us." As painful as it was for himself personally, living with AIDS and losing so many friends, "the reality is it *is*," said Williams. "And we've got to keep at it, we can't stop. When someone stops, someone has to pick up that sword and keep pressing on. Pick up the sword and keep fighting this battle to the bitter, fucking end, until it is out of our lives forever."²⁹

Remembering the past would be essential to the "future worth living for" that HIV prevention educators said gay men must imagine and work toward if they were to sustain themselves individually and the community in general to confront the ongoing plague while getting on with life. To preserve the collective memory of the epidemic and its effects, novelist Fenton Johnson said a "genuine" gay culture needed to emerge. Because one of the principal acts of culture is devising means of passing along wisdom, Johnson said, "It will be interesting to see whether ten years from now we have figured out ways of passing on what we have learned, or if in fact we have sunk into the general morass of materialism and consumer society and forgotten what we have learned out of this experience." Johnson noted that gay survivors of the epidemic have an opportunity and obligation to share the wisdom gained from their experience, in the hope that others may learn, too. "Fortunately, HIV is a passing phenomenon," he said. "But we have to preserve and remember what there is to learn from the passing phenomenon—just as the Jews are not engaged in the Holocaust now, but try actively to preserve its memory because of what it taught them, and what it can teach culture as a whole."³⁰

Although AIDS is obviously not only a disease of gay men, preserving the painful "heritage" of the AIDS epidemic requires that the gay community claim it in a certain sense as a "gay disease," in that it has affected—and still affects,

PART 10

disproportionately—so many gay men, even as it affects others. Ben Schatz observed that many in the gay community tried so hard to be inclusive that they excluded gay men, which actually hampered efforts to get proportionate prevention funding. He drew an analogy to the experience of Jewish people and the Holocaust to illustrate how gay people could claim the uniqueness of their experience while respecting that of others. “Jews were not the only people who suffered in the Holocaust who need to be recognized,” said Schatz. “Yet the Jewish community has never been hesitant to speak about the special situation of the Jewish community.”

Gay people were reluctant to make any claim that they were treated differently, suffering in a particular way. “But,” said Schatz, “the whole government response has been fashioned by homophobia.” When Schatz first raised the issue, in the late eighties, gay people—eager to “de-gay” the epidemic—resisted. But he persisted. “As long as you convey the message that we are unimportant and trivial,” he told them, “you are enhancing the disease that is causing the symptoms we are suffering.”³¹

Arnie Kantrowitz told me that learning about the Holocaust—“carry[ing] that torch forever”—is his “way of being a Jew.” He explained, “I got fascinated by human behavior in the extreme. And the concentration camps were that. For us, the epidemic was that, too.” Although he doesn’t subscribe to a theory that the AIDS epidemic was purposely unleashed for political purposes, like the Nazi Holocaust, Kantrowitz pointed out a number of parallels between the experiences of Jews during the Holocaust and those of gay men in the AIDS epidemic. “The effects on us were quite similar,” he said, “being ostracized from others, in this case because they thought we were all infectious. You’d go to somebody’s house and see that they were nervous seeing you drink out of a glass. Or parents pulling their kids out of school. It was a terrifying time.”

When right-wing extremists demonized gay men in the mid-eighties, Kantrowitz helped to found the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) to counter the

VICTORY DEFERRED

sometimes hysterical and fear-mongering portrayals of gay men in the news media. “As somebody who was so steeped in the Holocaust,” he told me, “I felt tremors going on, like the same thing was about to happen. It’s part of human psychology that it’s very hard to hurt someone like yourself, so you have to make them a ‘thing.’ The Nazis went far with that, where they called trains full of people shipments ‘of units.’ They dehumanized them to a level where they talked about people as though they were countable stock. It was a very effective device and ready to be used again by anyone.” People familiar with concentration camps did not take talk of quarantine lightly. “I was terrified and so were a lot of people,” Kantrowitz recalled. When GLAAD called its first meeting, 500 people showed up. “That shows you that the mood of fear was widespread,” said Kantrowitz, “not just that the epidemic would kill us but that our neighbors would run rampant, tattoo us, and isolate us.”³²

Besides the memory of terror and fear, Kantrowitz said that a powerful legacy of wisdom and hope emerged from the devastation. In “Friends Gone with the Wind,” he quotes a man named Filip Müeller, one of the inmates who emptied the gas chambers at Auschwitz, who described in the movie *Shoah* what he saw and learned from his horrific experience: “With our own eyes, we could truly fathom what it means to be a human being,” said Müeller. “There they came, men, women, children, all innocent. They suddenly vanished, and the world said nothing! We felt abandoned. By the world, by humanity. But the situation taught us fully what the possibility of survival meant. For we could gauge the infinite value of human life. And we were convinced that hope lingers in man as long as he lives.”³³

It would remain a challenge to get nongay people to look at and learn from the experiences of gay men in the AIDS epidemic when heterosexuals, white American men in particular, typically have little if any understanding of the experience of being the oppressed and marginalized “other.” The profoundly human experiences of gay people in the AIDS

PART 10

epidemic too often have been brushed aside simply by viewing gay people as “them” and not part of “us.”

Fenton Johnson described his own frustrating, embittering experience of speaking to a straight, educated, white man about his privileged place in the world, and realizing the man’s complete obliviousness even as he complained of being discriminated against as a straight white man. Said Johnson, “This would be laughable if he weren’t serious.” Resisting the desire to either laugh or punch the man, Johnson realized this challenge was “to figure out some way to reach this person, enlightening him to the enormous grace that he has been given by virtue of his position in the universe so that he might realize how big the gift is that he has been given and how little he has done to deserve it.”³⁴

Lessons learned from the AIDS epidemic transcend the already artificial boundaries between homosexuals and heterosexuals, because they go to the heart of what it means to be human. But as with “coming out” as a gay person, the challenge for the epidemic’s survivors would be to live as witnesses to the horrors they experienced and the changes they have wrought in individuals and the community. Bruce Patterson, the former GMHC hotline director and now a therapist, told me, “You can’t go through something like that without feeling a profound change going on inside. It’s given us a perspective beyond our years.”³⁵

In the AIDS years, young gay men often found deeply human connections with considerably older people because of striking parallels in their experiences. In “A Woman of a Certain Age,” John Preston described a Yankee matriarch in Portland, Maine, named Franny Peabody. In the twilight years of a long life, the Republican, Episcopalian shoe-factory owner was now a Democratic, Unitarian AIDS activist. Her grandson, Peter, died of AIDS early in the epidemic, and ninety-year-old Franny was determined to do everything in her power to help end for others the loneliness and social ostracism her own family experienced because of the disease. Over lunch with Preston, who hadn’t told Franny of his own AIDS diagnosis, the pillar of Portland society described what she had learned

VICTORY DEFERRED

from the gay men with AIDS she had known through her volunteer work on behalf of the AIDS Project of Southern Maine.

“Franny is seldom very emotional,” wrote Preston. “She is, after all, a Yankee matriarch.” But once, during lunch, there were tears in Franny’s eyes. “My dear, it’s so horrible,” she said. “All my friends have died as well.” Seeing that Preston was puzzled, Franny explained, “You see, my dear, all the people I know now are the children—sometimes the grandchildren—of the people I knew when I was young. The ones who are my own age are gone. I’m left calling sixty-year-old women ‘girls,’ and I sit and feel so alone some times. This is what you must be feeling.” For her part, Franny said, “At least I am no longer frightened of death.”

Taking Preston’s hand, she continued, “That’s the one thing you young men have given me. You have shown me that one can die with dignity and with courage. I was so petrified of death, it was so frightening, but now I understand that death comes, that one can greet it with a sense of propriety. I’ve sat with so many men and watched life leave them. So many, and they were all so brave. You will be, too. You already are.” The two sat quietly a moment. Then Franny sat up, smiled, and said, “And now, my dear, how about a cocktail?”³⁶

Like Franny Peabody, gay men in the AIDS epidemic learned to cope with the reality of death while getting on with the business of living. As a result of working with AIDS professionally and as a volunteer, and dealing on a personal level with the illness and deaths of so many friends, Bruce Patterson said, “AIDS has given me a new appreciation for life.” At the “advanced age” of forty-one, Patterson said he was celebrating life by going out dancing once or twice a month. “That part of living, that joyous abandon is really something I don’t take for granted anymore,” he said.³⁷ After years of mourning, many gay men, like Patterson, were rediscovering “the crazy compulsion with which we resolved all the tangled impulses of our lives—the need to dance,” as Andrew Holleran put it in *Dancer from the Dance*.³⁸

PART 10

Boston psychologist Steven Schwartzberg likened the lives of gay men in the face of AIDS to the experience of driving past a grisly bus accident. "It looks terrible and awful," he said, "But then you remember there's dry cleaning to pick up." He added, "We need to remember that we are living with an ever-present bus accident—and we still need to pick up the dry cleaning."³⁹ Approaching the third decade of the epidemic, Eric Rofes said the fact of the ongoing epidemic and the need to look to a brighter future required a challenging psychological balancing act. "We need to accept the fact that AIDS has happened," he told me. "It's not about accepting that there might not be a cure in our lifetime, but it's about psychologically accepting the fact that AIDS has happened, accepting that people are dead and we're never seeing them again, accepting that we're going to be burying friends and lovers the rest of our lives, accepting the fact that our sexual lives have changed, accepting the way that in politics and the public image the linkage of homosexuality and disease and death are going to be there for many generations."⁴⁰

When gay people come out of our closets and let nongay people know and love us for our true selves, when gay people stand up and insist without apology that our losses and heroism in the AIDS epidemic be counted—as they should be—among the greatest of human tribulations and accomplishments, and when nongay people finally acknowledge the full and shared humanity of gay people, the true magnitude of the AIDS plague in this country will be understood.

At an ACT UP rally in Albany, New York, on May 7, 1988, film historian Vito Russo, who died from AIDS in 1990, put it like this: "Remember that some day the AIDS crisis will be over. And when that day has come and gone there will be people alive on this earth: gay people and straight people, black people and white people, men and women—who will hear the story that once there was a terrible disease, and that a brave group of people stood up and fought and in some cases died so that others might live and be free. I'm proud to be out here today with the people I love, and see the faces of

VICTORY DEFERRED

those heroes who are fighting this war, and to be a part of that fight.”⁴¹

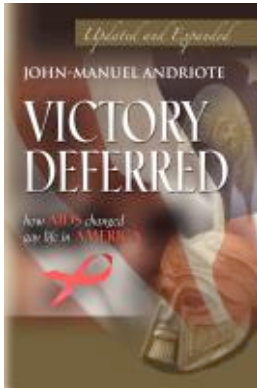
Until the day when the deferral of victory over AIDS finally yields to a victory celebration of the most joyous magnitude, when gay Americans are accorded every right and dignity that *all* people are meant to enjoy, life for gay people in this country will continue to be a delicate balancing act between the future and past, hope and memory.

When Arnie Kantrowitz described his own life in the mid-nineties, years after the giddiness and promise of the seventies and several lifetimes' worth of experience later, he talked about how the AIDS epidemic reshaped his world, particularly because of the losses of Vito Russo and Jim Owles, his two best friends from their days together in Gay Activists Alliance in the early seventies. “There’s some part of me that has never been able to deal with a certain level of it,” Kantrowitz told me. “It’s as if I just quietly had to accept that major pieces of my life were ripped out, and I had to keep walking, with no choice.” Kantrowitz keeps a huge picture of Russo in his living room, and a photo of Owles on his desk. He wears the gold lambda ring GAA gave to Owles after his first year as president, the one Owles on his deathbed asked him to wear because he had been Owles’ vice president.

For Kantrowitz, AIDS changed even the physical landscape of New York City, creating what he calls “hot spots.” He explained, “I don’t go near the block where Vito lived. I don’t go near the block where Jim lived. I once walked past Jim’s house, and it’s very strong, like this magnetic, intense feeling. I get it each time I walk past the hospital where he died.” Greenwich Village—like the Castro in San Francisco, Dupont Circle in D.C., “Boys Town” in Chicago, the South End in Boston, and so many gay neighborhoods across the country—with its promise of liberation, became a kind of ghost town haunted by the spirits of departed friends and painful memories. “Now when I walk around the Village,” said Kantrowitz, “I’m constantly seeing the spot where I last said goodbye to this one, the window where so-and-so used to live, the street where that one lived and this or that event went on.”

PART 10

In 1996, the year that combination therapy offered the first real hope of finally being able to live with HIV rather than die an inevitable, terrible death from AIDS, Kantrowitz said it had gotten better, but not much. "I still know some people who are HIV-positive or even AIDS diagnosed," he said, "but no one I know is expected to die in the next year. So I think I've relaxed about it on one level." But on another level, he added, "I'm still in pain talking about it. I still light candles for my dead friends. I do my own rituals. I keep in contact with friends of friends. And I still cry."⁴²



Based on hundreds of original interviews and extensive research, Victory Deferred chronicles the impact of the AIDS epidemic in the United States on the nation's hard-hit gay community. The book shows how AIDS transformed individual lives and major medical institutions, and built the gay civil rights movement.

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