

AIDS WALK NEW YORK AND GMHC: HEALING WITH HARD WORK, HOPE, AND HEART

By Kelly Rose Bellucci

AIDS activist and author Vito Russo once said, "We have to leave a legacy to the generation of people who will come after us. Remember that someday, 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."

In 1981, the United States was presented with an unfamiliar disease that infected a group of young gay men in Los Angeles. What first seemed like an uncommon strain of pneumonia would quickly turn out to be one of the world's most vicious epidemics: AIDS.



THE TRAGEDY THAT CHANGED LIVES

Before acquiring the name AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome), the disease was initially referred to as GRID (gay-related immune deficiency), based on the group of individuals it affected. This led to a slew of problems for the gay community, as they were not only being shamed, but also ignored and silenced. The government, medical community, and general public failed to recognize the seriousness of the outbreak, and their lack of action was devastating. Hospitals began denying services to those infected with the illness, and even went as far as placing people in black garbage bags when they died from AIDS-related complications. The FDA used the same method to test AIDS drugs as they would a simple nasal spray, which is a 7- to 10-year process.



PHOTO BY MATT MCDERMOTT

AIDS WALK NEW YORK WILL TAKE PLACE ON MAY 20, 2018. REGISTER FOR FREE AT NY.AIDSWALK.NET, WHERE YOU CAN ALSO CREATE A PERSONAL FUNDRAISING PAGE AND INVITE FRIENDS AND FAMILY TO SPONSOR YOU.



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Activists and patients began protesting in the streets as well as organizing advocacy groups to raise awareness. ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was one of the many groups formed during this time. These brave members traveled near and far, searching for a cure and fighting for the respect they deserved.

By 1989, AIDS was reported to be the number one cause of death for men under age 44, primarily in New York. In response, ACT UP formed the National AIDS Treatment Research Agenda with hopes of finding an adequate drug to help those battling the disease. With their hard work and dedication, a breakthrough was made in 1996. Effective protease inhibitors were developed and produced, ultimately saving 6,000,000 lives.

Today, although the disease can be controlled, a cure for AIDS still does not exist.

AN ORGANIZATION WITH OPTIMISM

Throughout any sort of crisis, it is the constant support and love shown by a community that provides individuals with hope. There were a number of important organizations present during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, but one in particular continues to flourish and help people live long and healthy lives: Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the first HIV and AIDS service in the world.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT GAY MEN'S HEALTH CRISIS, VISIT GMHC.ORG.

In 1981, a group of prominent gay men gathered in the apartment of writer and LGBT activist Larry Kramer, passing a hat around to raise money for AIDS research. Within the next year, GMHC was officially established. The organization set up the first AIDS hotline, which received more than 100 calls on its opening night. Since then, the organization has sponsored a number of fundraising events, campaigned to promote safe sex (including releasing guidelines titled "Healthy Sex Is Great Sex"), and both drafted and successfully passed New York State's AIDS-Related Information Bill.

TAKING STEPS TO FIND A CURE

Today, GMHC helps upwards of 13,000 clients a year and has evolved into a leading resource for people living with HIV or AIDS. The organization provides an abundance of programs and services for all, including a "Safety in Housing Program," which locates secure housing for HIV-positive individuals who are homeless or living in unstable conditions. Free and confidential HIV testing is also available.

In addition, GMHC coordinated the first AIDS Walk New York in 1986, which continues to support the efforts of Gay Men's Health Crisis today. From 4,500 participants to 890,000, AIDS Walk New York has become the largest HIV and AIDS fundraiser in the world to take place in a single day. The event has raised more than \$150 million in donations and serves as a model for other HIV and AIDS walks around the world.

With the faithful support of the community and the growing recognition of AIDS Walk New York, millions of lives have been saved, and GMHC's goal of ending the AIDS epidemic in New York State by 2020 seems more achievable than ever before.



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