

FRONTLINE: The Age of AIDS

Interview: Larry Kramer

[photo of Larry Kramer]

Larry Kramer: An iconoclastic gay rights advocate, author and playwright, Larry Kramer began sounding alarm bells soon after he read a July 1981 *New York Times* article about strange new cancers among gay men. He spoke with **Dr. Alvin Friedman-Kien, one of the doctors quoted in the *Times* article, who told him, "We're only seeing the tip of the iceberg. ... I don't think anybody is going to give a damn, and it's really up to you guys [the gay community] to do something..."** Kramer hosted a series of informal gatherings to raise money and awareness. In 1982, those gatherings became Gay Men's Health Crisis, the country's first AIDS organization. In the early years of the U.S. AIDS epidemic, he made controversial calls for gay men to stop having promiscuous sex. "It's been very difficult to criticize what we do publicly because it's considered a civil right and a private thing, which it certainly is," he says. "But when you start killing everybody, it sort of passes on into another category." In 1987, Kramer shifted his focus to finding a treatment; he co-founded the grassroots organization AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), which became infamous for its protests outside the New York Stock Exchange, the Food and Drug Administration and elsewhere to force accelerated approval of AIDS drugs. After a routine blood test, Kramer was diagnosed with hepatitis B and HIV; a few years ago he was one of the first co-infected patients to receive a liver transplant. He has been angry since the beginning and he is now distraught at apathy in young gay men and women. "They don't want to know," he tells FRONTLINE. "How can you dare to ignore everything that happened? These people died so that you could live. Those drugs are out there because people died for them. ... I have lost a great deal of pride in being gay." This is an edited transcript of an interview conducted on Jan. 22, 2005.

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"The immense knowledge we have learned about AIDS has provided us with precious little more than that knowledge. HIV/AIDS is now the worst disaster in recorded human history. In parts of Africa, 7,000 people are infecting each other each and every day. We who are here are idiots if we think this fact is not going to alter our lives mightily." This is the transcript of a speech Kramer delivered at New York's Cooper Union in November 2004.

INTERVIEW:

Talk about what it was like to be a gay man before Stonewall.

It hasn't changed that much for a great many people round the world, and certainly in a great many parts of America. It was terrible. You were ostracized. To be a gay man was to have no individuality and to have no life. In the big cities now it's a lot better, but it was a big secret you kept and that many people still keep, and when you keep a big secret, your life is so circumscribed as to border on the miserable. It takes away all your freedom.

I was at Yale from 1953 to 1957, and I tried to commit suicide in my freshman year because I was gay, and I thought I was the only person in the school who was. I was just totally and utterly miserable. When I finally was asked to go to the university psychiatrist and I described several other classmates whom I thought were gay, he said, "Oh, I wouldn't go and see people like that again if I were you." That's what it was like being gay at a place like Yale, and that still goes on for many, many people around the world.

The 1970s was a time of liberation and extraordinary change. What was it like to live through that?

I always hear about the so-called liberation and extraordinary change, and I think a lot of that's just malarkey. I don't think it was, so I think too much has been made of Stonewall as being this great thing that happened and changed the world. It didn't. I remember Stonewall as a small little thing that happened, and most of the gays didn't pay any attention to it, and most of the publicity was pretty awful. It's been made into a myth over the years as some sort of turning point, but it didn't change all that much, as everybody says. We're still in terrible shape, so how can you say things have changed?

But surely it seemed in a place like San Francisco, gay men were able to create a kind of community, almost a world of their own. Wasn't that a place where people could just be themselves?

San Francisco was an interesting case. I think every gay person thought at some point of moving to San Francisco. I know I did myself. It was exciting. It also suffered from being too much of a good thing. It also didn't provide the intellectual sustenance a city like New York provides, so it wasn't quite enough to move there for. The only thing you did move there for was to get laid more than you got laid in New York. For many people, of course, that was more than enough.

In 1978, your novel *Faggots* caused a lot of controversy in the gay community. What was its core message?

Faggots is basically about a person looking for love at that time in our history and not finding it. He comes to the conclusion at the end of a weekend of high living that having so much sex makes finding love impossible.

I question that it's always called controversial; it really wasn't. It created a big stir and made a lot of people quite angry, but it also made a lot of people very happy, and I got thousands of letters from gay people saying, "Thank you for telling it like it really is." The controversy such as it was came from the entrenched people who believe that f***ing is a civil right and that I was imposing on that. ...

This is the worst disaster in history that you're talking about. You cannot talk about it calmly, and any of your people who talk about it calmly, you shouldn't listen to; you really shouldn't.

It's always been very difficult to criticize -- and this is one of the main problems that caused AIDS -- it's been very difficult to criticize what we do publicly because it's considered a civil right and a private thing, which it certainly is. But when you start killing everybody, it sort of passes on into another category.

... How and when did you become aware that a mysterious illness was beginning to strike down gay men?

Dr. Lawrence Mass, who was one of the six co-founders of Gay Men's Health Crisis with myself and others, was a very caring -- still is -- physician who wrote a health column for the only [gay] newspaper in town, which was a rather tacky job called the New York Native. He wrote about things pertaining to gay health, and very early on, long before the July 3 or 4 or whatever the date was on the 1981 piece in The New York Times, he had been writing about earlier things that had cropped [up], illnesses.

When *The New York Times* article first appeared on that day, it scared the bejesus out of me and certainly caused a lot of chat in the gay world. Larry called my attention to it, and he said, "You really ought to go and talk to Dr. Alvin Friedman-Kien," who was one of the two doctors who made the announcement to *The Times*. ... I did in July, right after the article, and he said: "We're only seeing the tip of the iceberg. We don't know what it is. It would appear to be a virus, but we don't have any concrete evidence." He said, "I don't think anybody is going to give a damn, and it's really up to you guys to do something if you want to do anything."

What made you so alarmed? It was just a few indicators at that point.

Because the article pointed out something that if you had half a brain you would begin to put two and two together. All of the [cases] had a similar history of communicable diseases. We'd all had syphilis, gonorrhoea, amoebas mainly. ... So when I saw this business about [Kaposi's sarcoma], I said, "It's like the next bump up the ladder." It just made so much sense to me, [complete] and utter sense. I knew from day one. I just knew it, and I just to this day can't understand why everybody else didn't know it. Everybody had to be blind not to know it, especially when they said, "We think it's a virus."

No one said that loud enough, unfortunately, and gays refused to believe it, because they took the stand of "Oh, they're just saying that to interfere with our civil rights again; they're trying to take away our sex life," ... the most stupidest thing, the most destructive thing gays have ever done, people have ever done, in the entire history of man, by taking that attitude, by refusing to think, hey, I will cool it until they find something. ... I was a pariah because I said, "Cool it." People would cross the street rather than walk on the same side of the street with me.

Can you describe the atmosphere as this disease began to get a grip?

What atmosphere? Nobody paid any attention to it. *The Times* refused to write anything more about it for something like almost two years. It was impossible to get any media. If I got a shot on a local radio station I considered myself lucky.

I called a meeting here in this apartment in August of 1981. Alvin Friedman came and spoke, and Dr. Mass and I, Paul Popham, who became Gay Men's Health Crisis' first president, we invited everybody we knew -- disco friends, Fire Island friends, friends who were lawyers, doctors. It was a real cross section. There were close to 90 people here, and Alvin said essentially what I just said. He said: "We don't know what's causing it. We think it's a virus. No one's going to pay any attention to it. I need help; NYU needs help. If you want anything done, you guys are going to have to do it yourselves." He stressed that he was already getting into trouble at the hospital. The dean of the medical school was already telling him they were

already admitting too many people, and to watch it because NYU was the place everybody wanted to go when things got bad.

So at the end of the meeting I got up and I said, "Larry Mass and Paul Popham and a few others and I are willing to carry on meeting about this. If anyone else is interested, stay here, and we'll try to raise money for Alvin," because there were a lot of patients showing up that didn't have insurance, and we raised a couple of thousand dollars. Of the 88 people, I would say maybe 10 stayed, and that became the core group that eventually became Gay Men's Health Crisis. This is August, and Gay Men's Health Crisis didn't really have a name until January or February of 1982. ...

Looking back, do you feel that the Reagan administration abandoned gay men at this point of crisis?

... We didn't exist. Ronald Reagan didn't say the word "AIDS" until 1987. I've tried desperately to get a meeting in the White House; Gay Men's Health Crisis is already an established organization. I have a certain presence.

You have to realize I came into all this as somebody who had been in my own world a big deal. I had been assistant to the president of Columbia [Pictures and then] the United Artists. I had an Oscar nomination. I had made major movies. I had employed thousands of people. I had spent budgets of millions of dollars for these film companies. I was not a wallflower in the world, and the first time I realized that none of this meant anything was when I had to try and get [New York City Mayor] Ed Koch on the telephone to get an office for Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City, and I was made to feel like, just who the hell are you? It made me very angry, and it was actually that anger that propelled me more than anything. ...

What were the consequences of the Reagan administration's inattention to AIDS?

Seventy million people have now been infected with AIDS. He's not the only one. Every president who has been in the White House since has had the same attitude. ...

And when he died, I think you called Ronald Reagan "Adolf Reagan."

Adolf Reagan, yes, responsible for the death of more gay people than anybody in the world, than Hitler. I believe it, and I can't see why people challenge me when I say these things. He's that much a beloved asshole. ... This is the worst disaster in history that you're talking about. You cannot talk about it calmly, and any of your people who talk about it calmly, you shouldn't listen to; you really shouldn't.

You talked about how Gay Men's Health Crisis came into being. Tell us how it finally did come into existence in 1982.

Well, we started having regular meetings, and more and more people started coming, and it was very incredibly moving. ... First we had a dozen; then we had two dozen; then we had 100; then we had too many. Slowly things began to get put into place.

A miraculous man, Roger McFarlane, showed up one day to become our first executive director and slowly put into place the patient services that were needed, because the city wasn't doing

anything -- crisis counseling, insurance, legal, all of these things that the city should have been doing but wasn't. So we and lawyers showed up, and social workers showed up, and psychologists and psychiatrists showed up, and we were able to offer fairly soon a bevy of things that kids needed. It was exceedingly moving. I mean, you had gay guys taking care of gay guys who were dying, kids who couldn't tell their parents, who had no money for insurance, so we were cleaning their houses and buying their food or making their food, walking their dogs.

...

Why did you part company with [Gay Men's Health Crisis]? Did you feel it wasn't radical enough?

Read my play *The Normal Heart*. I guess it all seems petty in retrospect. That organization was me, morning, noon and night. I worked for that organization, and when I finally was able to arrange our first meeting with Mayor Koch, the board of directors, my friends that I formed, wouldn't take me to the mayor, and I said, "If you won't take me, I quit," and so...

And why wouldn't they take you?

Because they were afraid that I would blow up in his face and yell at him, which I would have done. ...

You've alluded to it several times, but where did you stand on the bathhouse controversy when that became an issue? What was the argument for and against?

They shouldn't be there. [But] you can't say that because it's against the civil right. ... There were only so many issues that we could deal with at one time, and somewhere along the line I realized there were a lot of no-win situations, telling people to stop having sex being principal among them. I more and more began to concentrate on finding some kind of treatment. ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power] was all about finding treatment and eventually was responsible for providing the treatment. Those drugs are out there because of ACT UP, and don't you forget it.

But in the early days of GMHC, it involved going through a lot of crazy people who had a lot of crazy cures. ... Everybody was terrified of losing their grip on something that was going to make them a zillion dollars, and they couldn't get patents on stuff unless you could prove that it worked, and proving that it worked required getting a clinical trial going, which cost money, and they all wanted to be financed with their miraculous discoveries, and there just wasn't that kind of money. So people were determined to get anything, and people would do anything to get anything. They would duplicate anything when the early drugs weren't released ... Bristol-Myers had a drug that we knew was being manufactured in Canada, and they wouldn't let anybody [have it], so we snuck into the factory, stole the drug and duplicated it. That's how we got a release. ... That's the kind of stuff we had to do. ...

I began to fight more and more for a cure and yelling at elected officials primarily -- I mean, they weren't doing anything. Somebody had to call them to task. This is a community that has no elected representatives. ... There's no Martin Luther King. There's no Jesse Jackson. There's no gay person, man or woman, who has universal recognition in the community, so there's no one to speak for us, to negotiate for us, to fight for us. ...

How did you react to Rock Hudson's announcement?

It was a joke. I mean, you took advantage of it because it got publicity. I was in London. ... We were rehearsing *The Normal Heart* with Martin Sheen, and that's where I got all the calls from *Time* and *The New York Times*, [asking] what did I think of Rock Hudson? Did I think this is going to do anything? So you go through all the s*** and say, "Oh yes, yes, let's hope it does," or "Let's hope it will make Ronald Reagan do something," which of course it didn't. You took advantage of whatever media stories you could [get]. It lasted 10 minutes, and it didn't result in anything. ...

I'm sorry -- it resulted in Elizabeth Taylor becoming an activist, which was an incredible gift. Of all the people in Hollywood, she's been the only one steadfast and there since the beginning, without failure anywhere, a miraculous woman, and that was because Rock was a good friend of hers.

But you don't think that Rock, because some Americans, straight or gay, could relate to him, you don't think it was a small milestone in people recognizing the disease and feeling some more compassion?

The word "compassion" troubles me because it should have been there from day one, and I still have yet to see it in sufficient quantities. No, I don't think it brought that kind of compassion. I don't think Rock Hudson brought any kind of compassion to anything. Seventy million cases don't all come if there's compassion somewhere.

... Why do gay activists find themselves at loggerheads with the FDA [Food and Drug Administration]? What was the nature of the argument?

When stuff started to need to be tested and approved, when ACT UP literally broke into the FDA offices in Rockville, [Md.], we discovered horrendous things. Foremost among them was that every report was written in longhand. They didn't have computer[s]; they didn't have typewriters for all we could tell. And it took 10 to 12 years on average to get a drug approved of any kind for any illness. People want to know why it took so long? That's why. Stupid things like that.

Well, we didn't have 10 or 12 years, and during the reign of ACT UP, we reduced that 12 years to less than one. That's what ACT UP accomplished. It took us a long time, took us a lot of screaming and yelling, a lot of protest. ...

What was the core of the moral argument that gay activists were using with the FDA?

We got clinical trials changed for the same reason that we got drug approval quickened, because you can't expect a dying person to take a placebo in a controlled trial if he's going to die. He's going to get that drug tested real fast to see if he's taking the real thing or the placebo, and if it's the placebo, he's going to stop taking it. and your trial's worth nothing. So we used the same argument with the FDA: We're going to get these drugs, come hell or high water. ...

Tell us what happened.

Well, Dr. [Anthony] Fauci and I did not get along from the beginning. He did not take office as head of NIAID [National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases] until 1985, when he

replaced Dr. [Richard M.] Krause. Of course we were just all champing at the bit with hate by then, because the main government organization of national health for five years was not doing anything. ... I called Dr. Fauci a murderer many times. ...

There was a big AIDS conference in Montreal and I was out walking my dog at night, and here comes Dr. Fauci going for a walk with one of his assistants -- I forgot his name -- a gay man whose job as far as I could see was to keep people away from Dr. Fauci, especially people like me. It was an historic meeting, because somehow we talked as we walked with my dog, Molly. ... We then followed it up by a lunch with a few of the boys, and then ... I arranged a late-night meeting in my hotel room with Fauci and maybe a dozen of these treatment and data [experts and gay activists], who presented to him ideas of things that he should be doing and wasn't.

He was just bowled over, and he was a great enough person to know that these kids were smart. And he opened the door; he let the activists inside. We were not allowed to participate in any of the NIH [National Institutes of Health] meetings even though by law you're supposed to; we got thrown out of meetings if we showed up, literally. He said no, they are all welcome. He even put us on a few of the NIH committees.

That was the beginning of a major turning point. Dr. Fauci has become the only true and great hero in all of this, in the government, in the system. ... I acknowledge him every chance I can, because we certainly got off to a rocky start.

How did the Fauci meeting lead to fast tracking? What did that mean?

The meeting was very important. Actually it was his idea, because he sensed that because of the work that we were now proceeding with, we had enough mechanisms in place to allow certain things to go out faster. We had relationships with drug companies; we had a few treatments that needed to be tested and a lot of dying patients who were desperate to test them. What it needed was a government official to make the first move, and that's what Tony Fauci did. It required cooperation from the drug companies, of course, and it required cooperation from the doctors who would perform the tests, and we had to provide a patient population, which was something that was not difficult to do. That was the beginning of a whole new way of data gathering and availability of treatments. ...

What exactly was ACT UP?

... ACT UP was started in 1987. There was no way that Gay Men's Health Crisis was going to be at all political or a loud voice. It was very much a pastoral organization. All of the people who worked there were not political people; they were caregivers. It was like a church organization really. These were not people who would go out there and protest and make noise, and I got very angry at them for that. ...

Rather than try to keep forcing them to do that, it occurred to me that we should have another organization to do that. I spread the word that I was going to make a speech at the community center, and an awful lot of people showed up, I'm happy to say. I made a speech saying something to the effect of that I had just happened [to see] that 10,000 Catholics had just marched on Albany to get something and got a lot of press, and I said, "You know, if 10,000 Catholics can do it, 10,000 gays can certainly do it."

There were a lot of sick people by then -- a lot -- and if they weren't sick, there were a lot of terrified people who were quite rightly afraid they were going to get sick, and a lot of them did. The organization was a success from opening night. By sheer coincidence, I had written an op-ed piece that *The New York Times* had accepted called "The FDA's Callous Response to AIDS," which they literally ran the next day. We arranged a protest outside of the stock exchange on the very day that this op-ed piece appeared. We were protesting the fact that Burroughs Wellcome had raised the price of AZT yet again, the drug they didn't own and had no money in. [AIDS activist] Peter Staley managed to get for the first time in history a group inside the Stock Exchange. They were all dressed like brokers, and once they got in they scattered the place with flyers everywhere which said, "Sell Wellcome," which means "Sell Burroughs Wellcome stock."

Joe Papp, my great producer at the Public Theater, had his shop make an effigy of Frank Young, who was head of the FDA, and we hung him in effigy from gallows that we erected outside of the stock market. We passed out copies of *The New York Times* op-ed piece. It couldn't have been better timed. ... We got on Peter Jennings' [World News Tonight]. We were noticed. And ACT UP was born and went from strength to strength.

But do you think ACT UP's tactics alienated general public opinion?

Who gives a s***? I'm so sick of that. You do not get more with honey than you do with vinegar; you just do not. If it makes them angry enough, maybe they'll say why are they angry. I mean, we were in jail all the time -- I cannot tell you how many. We had a cadre of lawyers who did nothing but get us out of jail. ... Professional people were leaving their jobs to come and be activists, because it was getting desperate and they were frightened, literally. The legal work that GMHC was turning out at that time was being done by partners from major New York law firms. It was amazing; it was totally amazing. **These two organizations changed history. AIDS would never have been attended to without GMHC, and the drugs would not be out there if it had not been for ACT UP.**

Can I ask you about President Clinton?

President Clinton was just as awful as all the rest of them, literally. We thought he was going to be wonderful. He had said all the right things when he was campaigning, [and then] he isn't in office 10 minutes when the "don't ask, don't tell" thing [regarding gays in the military] comes out, and he caves like the coward he was and continued to be throughout all this. He's admitted he was wrong about AIDS, but I don't need people to admit it; we needed people to do it then.

... What was your take on President Clinton and the needle exchange idea?

... Well, needle exchange -- of course it makes sense. People are going to shoot up, and you should give them clean needles. You have to be an idiot not to see that it makes sense. People are going to shoot up, and why don't they have clean needles so they don't get infected? You have to be really dumb to deny it to them, but this country has managed to deny it to them since day one -- another reason why there are 70 million cases around the world. There is not a good word to be said about anybody's behavior in this whole mess.

How and when did you find out that you were HIV positive?

I had a play on called *Just Say No*, which is about Ron Reagan Jr. and Ed Koch being gay figures, not doing anything, and I got run down, and I had a bad hernia, and the doctor said, "I really think you should take care of this." I went into the hospital, and in the routine blood tests they discovered that I had hepatitis B, and also they discovered that I had HIV. ...

I always expected that I had it. ... I mean, I suspect everybody did. As I said, more and more professional people were leaving jobs and showing up to help, because I think in their heart of hearts they were afraid, too. There was no point to being tested except to monitor your own behavior more carefully, which I had already been doing since 1981. There were no drugs to take. So I just assumed, [but did] not know officially. Then I knew officially, and I remember walking up Lower 5th near where I live and thinking to myself, "OK, you're going to have to live with this for a while now."

It was scary, like the ground had been knocked out from under you, but by then I knew an awful lot of people who had died and who were sick, and I'd certainly been to visit enough people in the hospitals, and you have to think, "OK, they had a time."

I had been exceedingly lucky with all of this, I should say. Everyone I know, just about, from the early years who was infected is dead. I don't know why I'm alive. Dr. Fauci said to me at a recent lunch that he thought perhaps I didn't get as big a dose of the virus on the interaction that infected me.

In any event, I'm still here, and every time I got sick there was something there for me which hadn't been there before. When my hepatitis B finally erupted a few years ago, there was an experimental drug suddenly available for hepatitis B, which I was able to get because they were doing a study. When my liver started giving out, no livers had ever been available for transplant for people with either hep B or HIV. Suddenly there was an experimental trial, and they were looking for people who were co-infected for liver transplants, and they couldn't find them because people were afraid to have the liver transplant. I said, "Here I am," because I was only given six months to live anyway, so what did I have to lose? I had my liver transplant three years ago, and I'm the poster boy. I have the liver of a 50-year-old man. Dr. John Fung, my great transplant surgeon, maintains you are as old as your liver, so I'm now 50 years old.

I feel wonderful. I never had to take the cocktail until I had the transplant. I never took any of the drugs that we had to fight so hard to get because my HIV was always low. I've never had an opportunistic infection. I don't have AIDS by definition. I'm still only HIV positive, so, as I say, I have been incredibly lucky in all of this. If the hepatitis had flared up six months earlier, I'd be dead, because that drug wasn't available to me. Same with the liver transplant. ...

We were filming in San Francisco just before Christmas, and on AIDS Day, I was amazed at how little was actually happening. We could find one candlelit demonstration, about 200 people in a suburb of the Bay Area. People sort of seem to think it's all over.

A very strange thing has happened in the post-AIDS generation. I don't know what to call them; it's not really post-AIDS, but let's call them the healthier, younger ones. They don't want to know. They don't want to know the old people; they don't want to know the history; they don't want to acknowledge that the people who died were even part of their history. I talk about this a lot. How

can you dare to ignore everything that happened? These people died so that you could live. Those drugs are out there because people died for them. [It's] shocking what's going on now in the gay population. I have lost a great deal of pride in being gay. ...

I don't think people are as frightened of getting infected now because all these medicines are out there, so if by chance they get drugged up and their guards are down that night and they don't use a condom, they're prepared to take that chance occasionally. That's just so dumb.

While the new drugs are marvelous compared to the old drugs, they are still incredibly complicated to take. Not everybody can take them. I'm lucky. There are side effects with all of them. Women particularly have a terribly hard time with these drugs, because these drugs are all developed on men, which is a whole other issue. ... You can go nuts on some of the drugs. I had to go off one because literally my lover and I just fought over and over again. I had no idea why. It just makes you manic in some people. But it's a very effective drug, and it's very useful to people who can take it. ...

This is the devil's bargain you make for all this. To get a drug approved quickly, the drug has not been tested as long as they used to test drugs -- years and years and years and years before they would approve them. What we're discovering now is that all of these drugs -- and there are a great many of them, thank God -- have different interactions with each other, a lot of them not very good, and you have to stay on top of them and have your blood constantly monitored, and you have to constantly find new ways to monitor them and new tests to take. ...

So living with these drugs is no bed of roses.

It isn't, and that's why I say yes, they certainly are easier to take than the old ones, but it's no bed of roses. It's amazing how often you can't remember if you took them that day. I've tried everything -- little boxes, little blabs on my computer, whatever. There will always be a day when you forget to take something, and quite frankly, you can't, because the body reacts very quickly to a missed dose, a couple of missed doses especially. It's very complicated. Adherence is very hard. I don't know what people who aren't educated or who don't speak the language or whatever -- it must be very hard, except that I'm told that adherence among populations who you wouldn't think would adhere to them well is actually quite remarkable.

What does it feel like now to have lived as long as you have and seen so many of your friends and contemporaries die?

Well, I'm obviously not the same happy-go-lucky [guy] I was in 1980, dancing the night away at Fire Island Pines. It doesn't do the things to you that you wish it would, or that people would think it should do. I get a lot of people saying, "Oh, you must be so grateful." ... It's made me fearless in a way I never was before. I'd yell at the president if he's next to me, which is not something I would have done. I'll get up in front of 1,000 people and tell them they're assholes because they're not using condoms, which I just did recently. ...

How big a role did media silence play in all this, and why was there a media silence?

Well, for the early years, the excuse I most often got was, "Well, there's nothing new to report." That was told to me by *The New York Times* itself and the man who was responsible for the early pieces and then never wrote anymore. I forgot his name, or I'd shame him publicly. It's

always got to be a new hot story, doesn't it? It's got to be barebacking or the gift or whatever. You can't keep saying 70 million people are infected. ...

And it's still the same. That's the thing you must never forget: It is still the same. The media in America is not covering American AIDS very much. They're covering African AIDS, as if somehow miraculously it's all stopped here. Well, it hasn't, and the one thing they're not saying about Africa is that all those people are going to die; there's no way these people can be saved, none. Somehow we're all supposed to have hope because Oprah does a program on them, or suddenly 1,000 people in some small African town are getting the drugs. It's just ludicrous, and that makes the big, major, heartwarming story on the evening news. ...

It's all the same. Nothing is different. The only thing that's different is that more people have died and more people are sick and more people are getting sick. It is a plague. No one ever calls it a plague. ... It has passed into the realm of being a plague. I've finally got Dr. Fauci to occasionally use the word, and he'll call me up and say, "Larry, I'm going to call it a plague in a speech tomorrow." ...