

LOVE IN THE TIME OF HIV

For more than 20 years, San Francisco remains a leader in the world's fight against AIDS

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Nobody knew what it was. Healthy people would wake up one morning and have difficulty breathing. It would get worse. They would go to the doctor. They would be admitted to the hospital and then die two days later. People started getting freaked out. Was it due to drugs? Was it food they were eating? Was it infectious? Was it something in the water? It seemed anyone could be dead at any time.

Only two decades ago, San Francisco was the national epicenter of a "war zone" claiming the lives of nearly 20,000 city residents. It was the dawn of the AIDS epidemic. Yet, if there was a place where the sick were less feared, San Francisco was the refuge for those seeking hope and those close to death.

Concern over the public health aspect of AIDS created a panic-stricken country. Numerous reports of discrimination revealed fear as surgeons refused to operate on HIV-positive patients, landlords barred HIV positive applicants from tenancy and parents withheld their children from attending school when they learned a classmate had HIV.

Today, "Know HIV/AIDS" television ads feature attractive couples promoting the "beauty" of getting tested. Annual fundraisers replaced weekly protests. The sense of alarm has diminished.

While the virus remains a global threat, the number of new AIDS cases in the Bay Area is the lowest it's been in 22 years. Compared to the peak of the epidemic in 1992 with 2,737 AIDS cases in San Francisco, only 245 cases were diagnosed last year. But San Francisco isn't as concerned with numbers as with quality and abundance of resources.

When Lawrence Breyer, now a 51-year-old retired San Francisco psychiatrist, tested positive for HIV in 1987, middle-age seemed far away. Breyer and his partner, Bill Brockett, also now 51, purchased their first home and were planning their future together. They both got HIV tested, but the results brought more questions than answers.

Breyer tested positive and Brockett negative. Breyer believes he contracted the virus in 1982 through an HIV-infected blood transfusion he received during an operation.

A couple of weeks after surgery, Breyer came down with a high fever and what he thought was the flu. Soon, blisters showed up on his feet and he developed fingernail infections. HIV was beginning to erode his immune system. He started out on AZT, a drug originally developed to treat cancer, which interferes with the virus' ability to reproduce. "And against all odds," he says, 22 years later, "here I am."

While an anti-HIV drug was available, Breyer recalls people "dying in droves." According to Breyer, it was horrible to wake up nearly

every day not knowing whether it was his last day. "Everyday was like that. It was living in the middle of a war zone," he says. "Bill and I reflected that we have so many more straight friends than gay friends and we were wondering what that was, and it dawned on us: because our gay friends are all dead."

San Francisco's population suffered a harrowing loss of 19,688 deaths from 29,338 reported AIDS cases, which doesn't include the number of families who may have changed the cause of death.

The shared sense of vulnerability spawned many community-wide movements toward raising money for research, education and practical care for people with AIDS. Breyer remembers the gay and lesbian community as being very separate and having little in common. But when AIDS came, "All that got put aside," recalls Breyer. "Women came through for men in ways that were just amazing; they didn't know they weren't being exposed. There was just a sense of 'this is what you do to take care of our brothers who are sick.'"

While the epidemic was in full force, there was a sense of being abandoned by the government — or worse. It was painful when there were public demonstrations at which people called AIDS "God's punishment toward gay people because [being gay is] immoral."

"There was a feeling in the community that the government's lack of response to the epidemic was because they really wanted to sit on their heels and watch us die," Breyer recalls.

And then there were friends and their deaths. "The best comparisons are to war-time experiences where you're with a group of friends and you look around the room and you think 'a year from now we're not all going to be alive. Who in this room is going to be dead next year?'" he says.

Many who felt alone and victimized came to San Francisco because gay people had significant political clout here. By 1983, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted to allocate \$2.1 million for AIDS programs. "The city really devoted funds to the department of public health to help address the issue; they did the epidemiology the Centers for Disease Control wasn't doing," Breyer says. "There was a lot of social support groups where people were able to receive compassionate care when they needed it in ways that they didn't know they were going to be able to get anywhere else in the county."

San Francisco led the country as a "model of grassroots support, grassroots fundraising, having the community take control where the government was failing and show the rest of the country that, you know, you don't have to be afraid," Breyer says.

The collaborative network of city and state agencies, community-