SILENCE = DEATH

Bringing Life to Queer Voices During the AIDS Crisis

Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration, and the Vatican?

Gays and lesbians are not expendable...Use your power...Vote...Boycott...Defend yourselves...Turn anger, fear, grief into action.
Cover Image:

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From a political project between six friends to the emblem of America’s most visible AIDS activist group, the history of the phrase *SILENCE EQUALS DEATH* alone encompasses the complex ways in which queer personal lives have always been heavily politicized. Never was the fear of gay and trans people more tangible than the period in which the American public perceived us to be a very literal threat to their survival, and yet the archival record stands as proof of the many ways in which the government and general public failed to erase queer existence in the face of our communal ties.

As our class exhibit takes you through what it means for our government to try to restrict and destroy queer narratives today, we ask that this be a space for reflecting upon the ways in which queer communities have historically taken care of their own through shared love, rage, and knowledge, and questioning how we might continue to honor those traditions today.

Our exhibit aims to confront silence by illuminating voices both past and present. In a callback to the die-ins associated with ACT UP protests in the 80s and 90s, we have drawn two body outlines on the exhibit wall: each addresses different aspects of our modern relationships with the history of the AIDS epidemic and different spheres of queer communal relationships during the AIDS crisis. Our zine, which can also be accessed through our exhibit’s QR code, discusses these aspects of queer history and their relation to the archival materials in more depth. As you walk through the exhibit, you’ll see questions written on the wall. We encourage you to answer these questions using the chalk provided.
An Introduction to AIDS In the Late 20th Century

The first report of what is now known as HIV/AIDS appeared in June 1981 in a Center for Disease Control (CDC) report on five cases of a serious form of pneumonia appearing in young, previously healthy gay men. By 1994, AIDS had killed nearly 200,000 people and had become the number one cause of death for Americans ages 25 to 44. By 2020, 79.3 million people globally had tested positive for HIV and 36.3 million people had died from AIDS-related illnesses.

Although a more comprehensive understanding of the virus and its routes of transmission was achieved within the first few years of the epidemic, the initial use of the term gay-related immune deficiency (GRID) or “gay cancer” by the media and public reinforced the misconception that this was a condition exclusive to gay men. In turn, this lasting association fueled widespread ignorance, both due to assumptions of immunity and the lack of regard for the communities most deeply affected: first among gay men, later among intravenous drug users and communities of color, as well.

This reaction was equally reflected in institutional responses. Throughout the height of the AIDS epidemic, the U.S. government came under fire for their leisurely and insufficient response to the ongoing crisis. Though the public health crisis was identified in 1981 and the term AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) came into use the following year, President Reagan didn’t even utter the word AIDS until September 1985. The CDC failed to disseminate accurate and accessible information regarding AIDS.

American War Deaths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>War</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
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<td>Civil War</td>
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<td>293</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
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(Graphic distributed by Dan Kaufman Graphics, Washington, DC, 1996.)
when the public needed it most. The resulting devastation in America’s most marginalized communities culminated in all of the pieces displayed here today.

Perhaps the most publicly visible form of AIDS activism was the work of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), the New York-based activist group that popularized the Silence = Death graphic and motto upon which our title is based. However, ACT UP’s work was far from the only significant response members of the queer community had to the crisis and governmental neglect, and we hope that our exhibit and zine can shed some light on the various responses carried out by members of Chicago’s queer community during these two decades.

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© 1987 AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power
Silence = Death
Sylvia Ebeid

*Silence = Death* is a significant work to come out of the rich history of AIDS activism. Through its minimal yet striking look, it had the ability to mobilize many to fight the stigma around AIDS. This was a time of politicized mass death, leaving very little space to grieve the loss of life. This poster was a reminder that even in the silence, people were dying. The silence of the government was its own form of violence, and people were paying the price. The LGBTQ+ community was not going to be complicit in this silence; instead, they drew attention to it.

The poster began with a group of 6 friends, all AIDS activists, who were working with the goal of bringing public attention to the epidemic. They wanted to gain momentum for the community to fight AIDS and the misinformation that was being spread, and posters are an accessible artform to disseminate information and get people talking. A lot can fester in silence, and this period is a strong example of that.

The work’s use of symbolism speaks to the level of intentionality in its design. Inspired by the symbol used to label prisoners as Queer in Nazi concentration camps, the pink triangle in the center of the poster evokes a long history of violence against Queer people.

The Silence = Death Project and resulting graphic ultimately played a pivotal role in AIDS activism, becoming both an inspiration to formal activist organizations like ACT UP and an international symbol of reckoning with the loss of Queer life and community during the AIDS crisis. The poster’s original context and its later use by ACT UP work to confront the intensity of the scale of loss experienced within the Queer community. Today, it serves as a reminder that the inherently political nature of daring to identify as Queer demands action and community involvement—to be a Queer person, one can never stand by.
To the Last Breath: Obituaries in the Archives

Ori Duque

“[My] last wish was to be remembered with one of [my] favorite sayings, geared at those who are living with this disease, but not excluding anyone: Keep fighting until your last breath is drawn out of your body because you can never be sure if anyone else is going to do the fighting for you.”

- Self-penned obituary, Roland Peña, May 1992

The archival document from which the above quote is taken serves as an introduction to a series of obituaries featured across the exhibit wall. Each honors the life of an individual in Chicago’s queer community whose cause of death was listed as AIDS. All of the obituaries after this first piece will be found in the smaller black frames, sourced from Gay Chicago Magazine’s 1991-1993 obituary sections and reconstructed as closely to their original formatting as possible.

In 1992, Gerber/Hart received a collection of papers from local Cuban American writer and Person With AIDS advocate Roland Peña. Between his letters, poetry, journal entries, and other personal documents, he wrote extensively about his experience as a Person With AIDS and a man approaching a terminal diagnosis. Among those documents is a copy of a will drafted a year prior to his passing, including an obituary he had written for himself.

Peña’s precise year of passing is not indicated in his archival materials, listed as “1993(?)” in correspondence with the latest dated document added to his collection. However, Peña clearly specified two local LGBT periodicals in which he wanted his obituary published, one of which sits in a series of 17 boxes in the Gerber/Hart archives. And, after flipping through 20 or so Gay Chicago Magazine issues from 1993, there he was: Roland Peña, 34, of Chicago, died on Wednesday, June 16, at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

Countless other AIDS-related deaths that populated the obituary sections of GCM throughout the ‘80s and ‘90s. Bartenders and interior designers, car salesmen and teachers, waiters and local entertainers: these were names and descriptions of ordinary people, all of whom passed away before it was standard for ordinary lives to etch themselves onto the internet.
Though cultural ideas about the queer community during the AIDS crisis have become defined by the era’s politics, activism, and art, archival materials allow us to reconstruct historical portraits of the more mundane aspects of Chicago’s queer community.

These works are framed and arranged to provoke consideration of the ways in which routine memorial practices served as queer communal responses to the external forces that sought both queer social and biological death, and in doing so documented and preserved lives that digital records might have no trace of.

At the same time, Peña’s own version of his obituary is standing proof of the ways in which obituaries are meant to cater to those left behind more than they are meant to serve as voices of those who have passed. As illustrated by the published obituary’s exclusion of the epigraph included here, Peña’s published GCM obituary lacks much of its subject’s humor and wit, his anger and directness. Ultimately, the personal voices of the dead remain, in most cases, silenced in the record. Thus, I chose to place Peña’s draft before the rest of the obituaries to keep them in conversation with the gaps in the archives.

This series of obituaries additionally exemplifies the ways in which the archival record often centers white men—I could find no obituary sections in the smaller publications by/for queer communities of color that I perused among Gerber/Hart’s periodicals. The absence of those lost to AIDS who were omitted from Chicago’s more mainstream queer publications then becomes an underlying presence in the obituary pages of GCM.

The obituary collection is therefore intended not only as a space of mourning but as a space of reflection: What details are absent from preserved documents, and what stories are missing altogether? What has kept queer communities of color feeling alienated from the right to contribute to formal archival records? And how can we use existing material to memorialize those for whom we will never have records, those who remained uninvolved in formal organizations, or those whose chosen names were known only to loved ones long gone?
OBITUARY OF ROLAND PENA

Drafted on May 12, 1992 and meant for publication in the Windy City Times and Gay Chicago.

Roland Peña, (age,) of Chicago Illinois passed on to Jesus on (date,) at (place,) most likely Chicago and his home of (reason, if AIDS is the cause it must be mentioned.)

Roland had fought a hard battle with (reason--AIDS?) for (number of years) and won. He had a self expressed wish to be remembered as a lover of nature, art (especially glass, his forte, and antiques) and all things beautiful.

Roland's life took a turn for the positive upon conquering his illness. He learned from many people how to bring the message of hope to others who were ill. He accomplished this through his published writings advocating the right for persons with AIDS to fight, incessantly if need be, for their rights and lives.

Roland wishes to thank Windy City Times as well as Gay Chicago for their continued interest in his letters and articles.

A separate and more personal thank you is extended by him to Chicago House, where he lived for (amount of years.) Andy Warhols' often said that every person will have fifteen minutes of glory. Having lived at Chicago House brought Roland not just fifteen minutes but at least twelve hours.
Roland is survived by his father, Toribio; sister Paula and nephews Adrian and Eric (Bela Lugosi,) all residing in Miami, Florida. In Chicago he is mourned by his lifetime partner, Randall Loss with whom he spent (number of years.) He is missed by their two cats, Ms. Marianne Biffy and Diamando trado (Retardo) and a slew of friends he built around him through the progression of his illness.

(Memorial unknown at present.) Roland's body was flown to Miami where he lays at rest where he Wanted to be, next to his beloved mother, Victoria.

Roland's last wish was to be remembered with one of his favorite sayings, geared at those who are living with this disease; but not excluding anyone: Keep fighting until your last breath is drawn out of your body because you can never be sure if anyone else is going to do the fighting for you.

Donations in Roland's name will be greatly appreciated by Chicago House By Northwestern Hospice.
When I was about six or seven, I lost my grandmother. To this day, it remains the only close death I have had to encounter in my life. It’s a milestone no one wants to hit, but eventually, everyone will. Death is a natural part of the cycle of life. But try telling that to a six-year-old when he finds out he is never going to see Grandma again. I am thankful for what happened that night, death aside. Being with people you love is a great remedy for grief, but one thing we all did that night helped a bit more. We all sat down when we had had enough of screaming and crying and put on The Master of Disguise. Say what you will about our taste, but as a kid who had just encountered death for the first time, it was a saving grace. The humor of the movie took a while to sink in, but after about twenty minutes or so, our sniffling and tears were replaced with giggles and eventually full-on laughter. When it was over, we could all still feel the ache in us, but it was different. We loved that in those moments that remind us of her, we could laugh instead of cry.

Laughing is one part of the process of honoring someone or something we have lost. When we sit around sharing stories of our lives, we often remember those that are the funniest or craziest. We always remember our strongest emotions. Eventually, you find yourself laughing and proud at the mention of old stories and old names. In 1993, Patrick Pacheco tracked several off-Broadway plays across America that focused on “modern” queer culture, culminating in an article called “Lighting Up: Humor as a Weapon Against AIDS.” He found an increasing rate of comedies among these plays: works that centered humor in their narratives surrounding AIDS. After a decade of turmoil in the community, grief had carried people to a state where they began to find humor in it.

The ability to turn to humor so early into the epidemic seems quite surprising given the severity of the crisis. Reagan did not even mention AIDS publicly until 1985, at which point

5,500 people had already died and three years had passed since the CDC had declared an epidemic after the death toll passed 800. In Scott Calonico’s docu-shot *When AIDS Was Funny*, it shows not only the government’s blatant disregard for the epidemic, but also the hostility the queer community faced from both the public and the White House. It seemed clear early on that the virus would be devastating, and those most likely to be affected had to do all they could to protect and support each other.

The comedy in these posters can tell so many stories about those affected by the AIDS crisis: the humor in grief, the desire to protect, and even the tragedy of neglect. While some posters we have featured in our exhibit were designed to express anger and rage, others come from the point at which AIDS advocates began to deliberately turn to humor to discuss the virus and promote protection. But regardless of approach, the graphics designed to provide these various forms of healing for those living through the epidemic were integral to how people were able to connect with one another.

Whether through shared pain, reminders of the stories we hold of those no longer here, or the history these posters represent, they all provide a means of bonding. This public-facing expression of care and concern forms the basis of connected communities where no one affected must grieve alone.
A Brief History of the Blood Donation Ban
Noah McKay

Just a few years after this blood drive, the FDA instituted a lifelong ban on blood donations from any man who had had sexual context with another man after 1977. This ill-informed policy reinforced harmful, unfounded fears of all queer men as a very literal threat to public safety. The ban lasted nearly 30 years, left unmodified until its reduction to a year-long deferral in 2015 and a total overhaul in 2023 when it was replaced with a non-gendered questionnaire about behavior associated with higher risk.

June 1981: The first cases of what is now known as Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) are identified in Los Angeles.

March 1983: The U.S. Public Health Service issues its first recommendation regarding blood donation & HIV/AIDS, urging “sexually active homosexual and bisexual men with multiple partners” to refrain from donating blood.

1985: A test is made available to identify HIV antibodies in donated blood, though it cannot identify those infected within a few months prior.

1986: A lifetime blood donation ban is instated for any man who’d had sex with another man at any point from 1977 onwards.

1992: A new antibody test is released that reduces the blindness window from months to weeks or even days.

2006: The H.H.S. Advisory Committee on Blood Safety & Availability meets to discuss the lifetime ban, focusing on the fact that the blood donation deferral period for other “risky” behavior (ex. using intravenous drugs or...
getting a tattoo or piercing) is only one year. Ultimately, they vote against overturning the lifetime ban.

**2015:** The F.D.A. shortens the lifetime ban on blood donation for queer men to a deferral period of one year after last sexual contact with a man.

**April 2020:** Amidst widespread blood shortages, the year-long deferral period is shortened to three months.

**May 2023:** F.D.A. guidance is revised from a ban on men who have sex with men to non-gendered questions regarding higher risk behavior—a step in the right direction towards destigmatizing queer sex and existence.


Health Misinformation and Its Damaging Impacts
Melanie Kerz

Book bans, challenges, and censorship may not always be seen as important issues. There will always be people who will claim that novels are “just stories” as a way of diminishing their importance and justifying their censorship. But when works of art are censored, the artist is being silenced. Where there’s silence, there’s no way to learn. There’s no way to talk about what you’re experiencing or feeling, and there’s no way of knowing who else may be going through something similar. This silence is dangerous, especially during a health crisis. When accurate information about AIDS was hard to come by due to political dismissal and cruel stereotypes, countless people struggled, and many others died.

It’s important to both continue to pursue the dissemination of accurate healthcare information and reflect upon the healthcare misinformation that defined the AIDS epidemic, recognizing that the same homophobic narratives that encouraged such widespread misconceptions are still perpetuated today.

In looking at the legacy of the AIDS epidemic, we can see the tangible effects of silence. Above all, AIDS scared people; the virus was spreading at an alarming rate, and the public didn’t know how to avoid it. There was a desperate need for accurate, accessible information around AIDS: what it was, how it spread, and how to treat it. The governmental response to the epidemic accomplished none of these, terming the virus GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) and leaving everyone uninformed and without healthcare assistance. This lack of knowledge intensified both the fear of AIDS and the struggles of those living with it, their loved ones, and the queer community overall. The association of AIDS with queerness caused misinformation to spread rapidly. This poster debunks the idea that the virus was transmissible through physical contact with a queer person (such as handshakes), shared surfaces (such as doorknobs and cutlery/tableware), or toilet seats.

Through the political dismissal of AIDS during the epidemic, discussion around the virus was silenced. This means that accurate information about AIDS was either restricted or difficult to find, and most people were only exposed to misconceptions and myths like the ones listed above. This was especially harmful because the public zeitgeist was riddled with fear around contamination. Since AIDS was associated with queerness,
homophobia allowed the idea that queerness was infectious or dangerous to proliferate in the public consciousness to such an extent that it still persists today. Even pop culture contributed to these narratives, as can be seen in the plethora of vampire movies that came out in the 80s—many of which used queer-coded vampires to further stigmatize the relationship between queerness, blood exchange, and forces of evil, such as The Lost Boys.

Unfortunately, such narratives are so culturally ingrained that they are still very visible, as laws like the panic defense continue to be valid in many places. They also lie at the heart of the rhetoric currently used to justify censorship of queer stories and lives, with accusations of infectious queerness turning into suggestions that by sharing their stories, queer people are trying to “make people gay.” It’s important that we look critically at the language used by people attempting to ban, challenge, and silence stories and see how this language has been used historically as a way of othering and silencing people, particularly those from marginalized communities. Infographics like these worked to spread accurate information and provide resources, showing the power of community action during the AIDS epidemic.
**HIV/AIDS Today**

In late 2023, 22-year-old Ohioan Caymir Weaver was sentenced to a year in prison for having sex while HIV-positive. Despite having engaged in a form of sexual intercourse wherein transmission would have been impossible, he had been with a partner who had forgotten his status beforehand and decided to involve law enforcement when he chose to remind her.

While our conception of HIV in the United States today is marked by the widespread availability of PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) and treatments that can even allow HIV to become undetectable—and thus untransmittable—in the bloodstream, Weaver’s inhumane treatment by the Ohio legal system as a Black and trans individual with HIV illustrates the fact that protection from the physical devastation of the virus has provided no protection from the rule of racism and transphobia in the United States.

Weaver’s story is merely one example of the many ways in which HIV/AIDS has continued to serve as a justification for upholding the institutional homophobia, transphobia, and racism that endangers queer and Black livelihood in the US.

Across the US, the CDC reports that 34 different states currently have laws that criminalize HIV exposure in some capacity, most of them remainders of the racist and homophobic legislative responses to the early years of the AIDS crisis explored in our exhibit; in 2023, the CDC celebrated the release of data indicating a record high percentage of PrEP prescriptions for those deemed most likely to benefit from it—at a mere 36%.

The panic once stoked by a virus that not even middle-class whiteness could protect against has subsided as effective treatments have transformed HIV into a virus whose threat is defined by access and social privilege—and with that transformation has come a dramatic shift in visibility and public perception.

As moves to censor queer narratives through book bans dominate our present public discourse on national queer issues, making space to connect with the history of strength and devastation in queer communities during the first decades of the AIDS crisis becomes ever more important. It grounds us in the reality that restricting queer voices invokes a history of restricting queer life at the most literal level, and the reality that book bans merely comprise one branch of a vast array of contemporary queer issues and struggles.

