Gay Seattle

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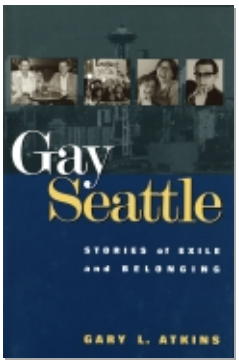

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At the Hospital
A Plague Arrives

In 1959, as MacIver Wells finished his first confrontation with the Seattle police, Arno Motulsky pursued a different battle in the jungles of the Congo. A young medical geneticist working at the University of Washington, Motulsky wondered why some Africans resisted malaria more than others. To find out, he and his team put needles into more than twelve hundred people, drawing blood to test for genetic resistance. In Léopoldville, a Bantu man was tested. Motulsky shipped the blood to the university for analysis, and when his own malaria study was completed, the blood was stored first at the university and then at the Puget Sound Blood Center.

No one would know it for three decades, least of all Motulsky, but the young scientist had just sent evidence of a mysterious new virus to Seattle. In the 1980s, other researchers examining microscopic amounts of the Motulsky collection would designate the Bantu man the earliest documented case of a new infection. His blood showed traces of the human antibodies that even then were struggling against the virus; no one knew whether he had survived, but the chances seemed unlikely. In 1997, other scientists examining Motulsky's samples with more advanced techniques found genetic remnants of the virus itself in the blood.

The samples Motulsky gathered stayed safely quarantined. But when the virus eventually made its way to Seattle a second time—unsealed and unsafely—it would kill more than thirty-five hundred people in the city and its surroundings before the century's end. And it would infect additional thousands. More than three-quarters of the dead would be gay men.[1]

The first news came June 4, 1981, in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* from the Centers for Disease Control. A bizarre pneumonia had struck five healthy men in Los Angeles.

At the time, the *Seattle Gay News* was busy noting other developments, not diseases. Charlie Brydon's success against the Initiative Thirteen campaign had propelled him to national prominence and to New York as one of the two directors of the National Gay Task Force, but sharing responsibility with a lesbian director had not worked for Brydon, and the task force itself was being accused of drift in the face of a renewed Christian assault, this one led by the Reverend Jerry Falwell

and his organization, the Moral Majority. Falwell perched on the eve of a major triumph—convincing Congress to overturn a repeal of the sodomy law in the District of Columbia. Brydon was resigning and coming home. In Seattle itself, the summer's already warm weather had drawn gay nude sunbathers back to the U.W.'s arboretum, where one police officer had apparently removed his own shirt to walk undetected among the crowd and then had used a walkie-talkie to summon uniformed reinforcements—or so the tales of harassment from the arboretum beach went. On Capitol Hill, a new gay bathhouse prepared to open, the likes of which the city had never seen before. Gone would be the dinginess of the old downtown bathhouses that Jacob Heimbigner and others had operated with the tolerance of the police. Instead, the upscale Club Seattle was installing a thirty-person hot tub, a bunkhouse, workout machines, and what manager Larry Woelich would call an "arena," where, he promised in an interview with the *Gay News,* "anything goes."[2]

For Pride Week that June, the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus was performing at the Opera House. The hall was packed and new friendships were being made, by day and by night.

In August, the *New York Times* reported forty-one cases of a rare cancer among gay men in New York and California. Club Seattle was planning its grand opening, an extravaganza called "Steam." By the end of the month, doctors throughout the country had counted one hundred diagnoses of either the cancer or the unusual pneumonia, all in homosexual men. Half had already died. A story in the *Seattle Gay News* that month focused on a decision to change the name of the Seattle Clinic for Venereal Health to the Seattle Gay Clinic. It had been created in 1979 to counsel and treat gay men for sexually transmitted diseases. The article made no mention of any new virus.[3]

Few gay men even knew about it. Those who did were mostly beginning to hear from friends in San Francisco or New York.

Seattle would have the bittersweet luxury of fearing the plague before it actually arrived in columns of statistics. It would be known as a "second-wave" city, which meant that it had a little more time to prepare than did San Francisco or New York. But "prepare" did not mean avoiding the initial infections. Those had already occurred. It simply meant time to ready for triage.

On New Year's Day, 1982, the person who sent the letter to the *Seattle Gay News* signed himself "Extremely Concerned." He had heard rumors that a young man in Seattle had been diagnosed with a severe case of cytomegalovirus, or CMV. Although a rather common virus usually carried without problems, sometimes it caused flu-like symptoms—aches, a cough, fever, sore throat. It could also cut a person's ability to fight infections. For some reason, gay men in other cities had begun visiting doctors' offices with high counts of CMV.

"Extremely Concerned" called himself "a sexually active gay man" quite famil-

iar with "bouts of gonorrhea, hepatitis, warts," but the new reports about pneumonias and cancerous purple skin lesions and now cytomegalovirus were bothersome. "I am seriously considering radically altering my lifestyle," he wrote. "What disturbs me the most is the lack of awareness most gay men have of these diseases. . . . Personally, I'm scared monogamous if not celibate. For all our concern about the Moral Majority . . . I would find it extraordinary if we were defeated not by a band of religious zealots, but by our own dynamic sexuality."

That issue of the city's gay newspaper also headlined a long report written by a doctor defining words few gay men in Seattle knew at the time, words that would become much more frightening as the epidemic spread. Pneumocystis carinii. Kaposi's sarcoma. Immunosuppression.[4]

Still, no cases had yet been reported in the city.

Seven more months passed. In July 1982, the strange complex of infections gained its official name: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Four months later, on November 12, 1982, the *Seattle Times* discovered that the plague had arrived in the city—indeed, had arrived the previous June just one year after the CDC report, but the health department had not announced it. The first positive diagnosis of a case of AIDS had been made in a man who lived in both San Francisco and Seattle, frequently traveling between the two cities. He had developed Kaposi's sarcoma. By the time the announcement was made, he had already left Seattle. His name was never published; he was simply a shadow that had vanished. Dr. Hunter Handsfield, who as director of the health department's sexually transmitted disease program would be taking the lead in responding to the virus, tried to sound reassuring. Although AIDS had arrived in Seattle, he told the *Post-Intelligencer,* it "is not a scourge that's wiping out people on every street corner; the homosexual community has no reason for panic." Headline writers for both newspapers also seemed at pains to comfort their heterosexual audiences. The *Times* headline rather verbosely called AIDS the "deadly disease that mainly affects gay men," while the *Post-Intelligencer* reassuringly titled its story: "Only One Local Case of Gays' Disease Found."[5]

In its issue that week, the *Seattle Gay News* introduced readers to yet another new word: lymphadenopathy. Handsfield already had fifty men with the symptom under study. "The long word," the writer explained, "refers to a swelling of the lymph glands."[6]Suddenly, a lot more men began to suspect they might be sick.

"When I first arrived in Seattle about a year ago," the column writer in the *Gay News* said, "one of my goals was to achieve emotional release, specifically to regain the ability to cry. I finally achieved this release barely four weeks ago." He had visited a doctor in that fall of 1982 to ask why his two lymph nodes were swollen. "As I allowed the tears to flow and the bad feelings to erupt," he wrote, "I became aware of the verbal messages playing themselves over and over in my head. The one that elicited the most woe, the deepest despair was this: 'I don't matter . . . I don't mat-

ter.' Would it be too mystical to suggest that acquired immuno-deficiency syndrome is the perfect physical metaphor for 'I don't matter'? After all, why defend a body that doesn't matter?"[7]

The writer did not sign his column. At first, no one who had the disease wanted to be known, lest they be shunned. AIDS had come with its own new closet.

At first, the disease moved very slowly into Seattle. Three months passed before the diagnosis in January 1983 of a second case, a twenty-seven-year-old gay man hospitalized with pneumocystis carinii. The man's illness was a surprise, Handsfield said; he had actually been part of the health department study but had been dismissed because his symptoms had not met the criteria for AIDS. Then, all of a sudden, he grew sicker. Handsfield still projected calm. "Two cases do not make an epidemic," he told the *Post-Intelligencer.* This time the headline writer referred to it as a "mystery gay disease."[8]

The reports of new diagnoses became steadier. Just a week later, in early February 1983, a third diagnosis was made—this time of a heterosexual who claimed to have had no sexual contact with other men, was not a hemophiliac, and said he did not shoot drugs intravenously, the three factors that seemed likeliest to communicate the virus. He even said he had not been out of the city for two years, apparently presuming that one had to travel outside Seattle in order to acquire the virus. The *Times* headline seemed perplexed this time, noting somewhat contradictorily, "Deadly 'Gay Disease' Found in Heterosexual Seattle Man." For its part, the *Post-Intelligencer* felt that the real news, in fact, was that the "Third AIDS Case is Not a Gay Man."[9]

In late March, the first death of a state resident finally occurred—not of a Seattle man as it turned out, but of a thirty-two-year-old Tacoma man who also challenged the stereotype by identifying as heterosexual. Almost at the same time, a thirty-seven-year-old gay man who had had symptoms of the disease for two years died in a Seattle nursing home. Two weeks later, another young man in his thirties died in Seattle from what officials called "wasting syndrome." His lymph glands had swollen; he had rapidly lost weight; he could no longer fight off infections. He claimed to be neither gay nor a drug user. By the end of the month, a fourth man had died, this time of pneumocystis carinii. He had gone to the emergency room at the Virginia Mason Medical Center to try to get a refill for an oxygen bottle a friend had loaned to him.

The *Post-Intelligencer* dutifully described the way one of the four men had died from "a combination of a herpes-like virus and an amoeba-like parasite called 'pneumocystis carinii' that settled in the lungs." The newspaper added, "The organisms that felled him are quite common and usually no problem for people with normal immune systems."[10] It was as if a Hollywood horror film was slowly unfolding. Seattle would be spared the speed of devastation that had occurred in New York, where in the first year there were more than five hundred diagnosed and

almost two hundred dead. But for those most likely to be affected, the slow creep carried its own terror.

The virus quickly interrupted whatever other agendas gay activists had. It brought many challenges. Some were global and scientific: unmasking the mystery of the source and its spread, protecting the blood supplies for hospitals, creating a blood screen to see who had been exposed, looking for a vaccine and a cure. Other challenges were very local and could only be addressed city by city, gay community by gay community. Most of these had to do with communication and with the creation of new geographic spaces.

There was, for example, the question of how to help those who had already contracted the disease. Although each of Seattle's major gay organizations—the Dorian Group, the Seattle Counseling Service, Stonewall, the Lesbian Resource Center—might address a piece of the response, none was equipped to fully focus on the crisis and to help the infected cope with the demands of money and medicine.

Too, there was the need to create communications that would head off further infections, to not just educate, but to change the sexual behaviors that spread the virus—once the scientists figured out what those were. There would be that touchy matter of actually communicating about gay sex. In the 1970s, Brydon had avoided that with his rhetoric about privacy; so had SCAT and WAT by talking about gays and lesbians being neighbors. No one publicly talked about what gay men did in bed together, except, of course, the religious extremists who used graphically exaggerated images as part of their strategy for opposing homosexuality. But if gay men were going to stop the disease, they would have to talk explicitly about what to do and not do sexually, and they would have to conduct that talk in public to reach as wide an audience of both closeted and uncloseted men as they could. It was one thing to confront heterosexuals in the 1970s with public talk about civil rights or privacy or even gay pride. It was quite another to suddenly distribute condoms on Capitol Hill carrying explicit pictures of erections and anal intercourse. The sexual boundaries of Seattle's civic conversation would need to be transfigured.

There would also be the quest to reshape the meaning of certain physical spaces and the types of communication carried on there. Pioneer Square had provided the underground refuge for clandestine social meetings; Renton Hill, the pulpits for a new identity; the University District, space for ideological argument; Denny's knoll, insider reforms. Quickly, AIDS would call into question one specific piece of Seattle's established gay territory: the male bathhouses and their role as possible centers for the kind of sex presumed to spread the disease. AIDS would also dramatically introduce gay concerns into the piece of the civic conversation that dealt with medical care for all citizens. The doors of hospitals would have to open. Who would care for someone carrying what seemed an always fatal virus? Who was a "family" member—the parents who might have rejected their gay son, or

the ragtag mob of friends and volunteers who maintained twenty-four-hour vigils? Where would there be new asylums for those who would be sick?

And, finally, of course, there would be mourning to be done.

Bobbi Campbell and Tom Richards first met at the Eleven-Eleven Tavern, one of the neighborhood bars for gay men that began to develop away from Pioneer Square during the 1970s. Both were young—in their early twenties—out, gay, sexual, politically active. Richards had come from the Midwest, via Canada while protesting the war in Vietnam. Bobbi Campbell had been born in Tacoma, had attended the University of Washington, and was volunteering at Bob Deisher's Seattle Counseling Service. Like many other young Capitol Hill gay activists in the 1970s, he lived communally with other gay men in the old box houses. Campbell's residence, Richards recalled in a later interview, was known as the "East John Street Gay Men's Collective" and was located at Eighteenth and East John, just at the divide between Capitol Hill and Renton Hill. It was, Richards said, "a notorious and famous house with colorful and smart people"—all of whom would shortly be prematurely dead. Campbell and Richards became lovers, but Campbell soon moved on from Seattle to San Francisco.[11]

In September 1981, Bobbi Campbell hiked along the Big Sur coast and noticed what looked like blood blisters on his feet. At first, he blamed the hike. But when they stayed and grew, he consulted a doctor. The purple spots were Kaposi's sarcoma, and Bobbi Campbell became the sixteenth case of AIDS to be diagnosed in San Francisco. In December 1981, he was visiting Tom Richards in Seattle when a phone call came from a mutual friend in New York, a friend that Campbell had also been sexual with and had grown to dislike. The friend, named Jim, thought he too might have the gay cancer. Richards remembered: "When Jim was on the phone and Bobbi was standing there, I said you two need to stop fighting with each other and talk, because you both have something that is very rare. You are the earliest people in the country to be experiencing this. I got Bobbi on the phone with Jim, and they mended fences and talked. It was shortly thereafter that Jim died, and he died very quickly."

That same month, Bobbi Campbell decided to go public—one of the first persons with AIDS to do so. In a column in San Francisco's gay newspaper, the *Sentinel,* he wrote: "I'm Bobbi Campbell and I have 'gay cancer.' Although I say that, I also want to say I'm the luckiest man in the world." He proclaimed he would become a "KS Poster Boy," not just a victim or a sufferer. "I'm writing," he declared, "because I have a determination to live. You do too—don't you?" From then on, he started wearing a button that said "Survive." He told friends in both Seattle and San Francisco that no one was doing anything. Organize, he kept saying. Organize.

Because of his willingness to be public, Campbell soon became one of the most prominent people with AIDS in the country. He appeared on a brief segment of the *CBS Evening News,* with reporter Barry Peterson telling the nation, "For Bobbi

Campbell, it is a race against time." Campbell also became part of a gay drag group, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, which was beginning to raise money and educate about AIDS. By then he was a registered nurse, so Campbell christened himself Sister Florence Nightmare and helped design one of the earliest AIDS educational pamphlets.

In August 1983, *Newsweek* put his picture on the cover, along with a story about "Sex, Politics and the Impact of AIDS." Campbell tossed his chin upward, looking boyishly defiant. He was only thirty-one. A week later, he came to Seattle for a panel presentation about AIDS, wearing a T-shirt that said "AIDS Poster Boy" and grinning behind wildly oversized black-rimmed glasses. He walked gently because of the swollen lesions on the bottoms of his feet and told the *Seattle Times,* "Just don't call us victims. I looked that word up in the dictionary. It means 'one who is sacrificed.' That admits defeat. I'm still alive."

A year later he was dead.

James Flanigan became the first person with AIDS in Seattle to actually be named by the city's media. He had moved to the city in the mid-1970s from his home in Wisconsin, and in the late 1970s, he had defeated Hodgkin's disease only to suffer by 1981 from the usual symptoms of AIDS. Multiple infections dilated his blood vessels and weakened his lungs. In his final months, he dropped thirty pounds. One friend, George Bakan, who was also chair of a new Seattle AIDS Action Committee, told the *Times* that at the end Flanigan "was just fed up with getting probed and poked by doctors." When he died in August 1983, James Flanigan was thirty-eight.[12]

Lynn Knox found out that same year, 1983. His blood carried the antibodies to the virus. Knox worked as a cosmetologist and, according to friends, loved to be neat, so the unpleasant discord of the disease—especially the incontinence—would bother him greatly. Doggedly, he took a shower every day even when he did not feel well enough to do so. "I've never seen such a fighter," a friend told the *Seattle Times.* "The guy had class." He also had his cockatoo, Tootles, to love. When he died five years later, Lynn Knox would be forty-two. He would leave the cockatoo to a friend.[13]

In October 1983, in a letter to the *Seattle Gay News,* John Aaron had this to say: "Come on you men of Seattle, WAKE UP, get your head out of the sand, stop looking the other way, stop using stupid unrealistic excuses for continuing your incessant promiscuity. All this is going to accomplish . . . is KILL KILL KILL. Does a cock mean so much to you that you DARE to give or take death for it? . . . It is only through LOVE not LUST that we can fight and survive this AIDS period. Why can't we start loving more and fucking less?"[14]

No one knew what to do at first. What to say. How to say it. Whether being gay and sexual really was unhealthy and needed to be stopped. Whether there was some combination of factors that had made gay anal or oral sex suddenly deadly.

At first, no one even knew that condoms could stop the virus. In the absence of even a single confirmed practical recommendation for prevention—save celibacy—rumors and fears abounded. All that a professional counselor writing in the *Seattle Gay News* in 1982 could say to a worried gay man was: Learn what you can about AIDS. Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of certain behaviors, like multiple sexual contacts. Don't waste time worrying. See a doctor if symptoms develop. Help others who already have the infection. Don't panic.[15]

That was it.

But it was hard not to panic. Tom Richards, Bobbi Campbell's friend, recalled, "I was convinced I had it. I couldn't see any way that couldn't be possible. Everyone I knew, who I had an affair with, or had slept with, had all gotten it." Richards even started running up large credit-card debts and neglecting his work, "living like I was going to die in a very short period." Richards would turn out to be unpredictably lucky. The virus was temperamental; he had not contracted it. He had to pay his bills.[16]

For the first three years, from 1982 through 1984, Seattle built while it waited, creating the underpinnings of what would eventually evolve into a multimillion-dollar structured response to the arrival of the virus.

The government's response would be coordinated through the Seattle–King County Health Department, which formed an AIDS Surveillance Group to track the disease, as well as an AIDS Assessment Clinic to provide counseling and, once a blood test was available, determinations of who had been exposed. For their part, gays and lesbians in the city were by now well experienced at organizing new groups, and they quickly heeded Bobbi Campbell's call to do so. They also learned from their own Initiative Thirteen experience, agreeing to disagree when necessary and thereby creating complementary organizations.

Two quickly emerged as dominant, reflecting a division similar to that between the Dorian Group and the SCAT activists during Initiative Thirteen.

The Northwest AIDS Foundation brought together many of the downtown gay insiders—people like Charlie Brydon, attorneys Jack Jones and Tracy Brown, well-known landscape architect David Poot, and Dr. Robert Wood, a gay physician who had begun treating people with AIDS. At first, from 1982 until 1984, the foundation would primarily focus on raising money and helping those already infected work their way through the bureaucratic morass of welfare and disability payments. When necessary, it would even provide cash to people who had lost their jobs. After 1985, it expanded into education campaigns specifically targeted at gay men.

Taking a more grassroots neighbor-to-neighbor approach, activists such as Josh Joshua, working with the Seattle Gay Clinic, launched an appropriately named Chicken Soup Brigade, which quickly emerged as the gay community's Florence Nightingale. Chicken Soup would eventually be staffed by hundreds of volunteers carrying food to the housebound, cleaning their kitchens and their toilets, driv-

ing them to doctors, waiting in emergency rooms. The Northwest AIDS Foundation might deal with bureaucracy and with persuading healthy gay men to stay healthy, but Chicken Soup embodied what was quickly going to become the key value needed to meet the epidemic: compassion.

Two other organizations filled gaps by 1984. Shanti/Seattle would train volunteers to understand the emotional stages of dying and then assign them, long-term, to be buddies with individuals and families. The Seattle AIDS Support Group (SASG), which Josh Joshua also helped create, would form a meeting space for people with AIDS, so they could find companionship and talk about their new lives and ways to empower themselves.

Eventually, SASG would find its home in that gay healing space of the early 1970s, Renton Hill, moving into an old box house at Seventeenth Avenue and John Street. It was next to Bobbi Campbell's old corner.

The first challenge was to decide what could be done and what could not—not easy when so little was known about the virus or how, exactly, people contracted it. When a group of gay businessmen held a meeting with Hunter Handsfield in May 1983, one member of the audience angrily accused the man who was in charge of Seattle's response of doing nothing but saying that AIDS could be acquired through sex. According to a *Seattle Times* report, Handsfield shrugged and answered, "You're entirely right. I haven't said much. We don't know why it happens."[17] And no one was sure how to stop it.

In that atmosphere, it was easy to look for any target where it seemed that something—anything—could be done. San Francisco's health department had decided to launch an attack on a piece of gay geography, zeroing in on gay bathhouses and trying to close them. At least, the thinking went, something visible could be done to stop the promiscuous "lifestyle" that physicians were then saying seemed to contribute to what the media was calling "the gay disease." Seattle quickly confronted the same tactical question.

Bathhouses for men had held a place in the city's landscape ever since the 1890s, when several sprang up to serve miners off to the Yukon and Klondike. By the early 1900s, at least seven were listed in a city directory, among them the Marble Baths on Cherry, the Club Baths on Jefferson, and the Hotel Tourist baths on Occidental. They offered a little warm steam to shake off the cold, dirty winters as well as a place to relax and enjoy stories about the fortune ahead or the journey behind. Perhaps the best known had been the Turkish Bath at the Northern Hotel on First Avenue, built by Seattle pioneers Charles Terry and Arthur Denny shortly after the Great Fire of 1889 leveled most of the mudflat. The Northern, constructed in a high Victorian style of red brick and gray stone, had become one of Seattle's major hotels during the Alaskan gold rush and remained so during the early part of the century. Its baths spread through the basement. During World War II, after the Northern's heyday had ended, the steam works became a separate operation, known

as the South End Steam Baths. Whatever the mixture of clientele had been before, it now became definitively gay. Like owners of other gay establishments, the South End's operator, Edwin McCleary, took to paying off the police in the 1950s and 1960s to stay in business—up to two hundred dollars a month. The South End would operate for five decades before it closed in the 1990s.

For gay men in Seattle, such places as the South End provided rituals that were both sexual and social. One explanation of their attraction had come in January 1978 before AIDS arrived, when a man whose only name was Stioux talked to the *Seattle Gay News* in exuberant terms about what the baths offered, as well as what the gay sex that some defined as promiscuous provided. Stioux was a spokesman for Dave's Baths in Belltown, which had once been managed by Jacob Heimbigner before Heimbigner bought the Atlas Steam Bath in Pioneer Square. "One of the things I really like about being gay," Stioux said, "is the freedom, which I don't see in the straight community, to express ourselves and play in places like baths, where people are encouraged to do whatever they want to do, within reason, without hurting anyone." Men went to the baths to find not only sex but companions, maybe even their Prince Charming, which he assured the readers happened "often enough." Even when gay men rejected one another's advances, Stioux cheerily noted, they usually very gently removed the hand that had tentatively touched their thigh. No roughness, no rudeness. "How nice, how considerate," he said.[18]

Even after AIDS arrived, the baths held a mystique for gay men. A *Seattle Gay News* writer, T. T. Roth, described the allure in a 1986 story: "There was something about those hallways, their silent promise, that reminded me of barracks, of trusting or needing to trust other men. . . . I met a man some weeks ago. He wasn't obviously attractive [but] our eyes met and there was a kinship."[19] At their best, the baths provided a geography where one could affirm the value of even the briefest of sexual relationships, in a dissent from the cultural belief that the only relationships that truly mattered were those that were long-lasting.

To heterosexuals, the gay baths furnished shadowy sexual intrigue and fear. In 1967, a writer for *Seattle* magazine named Patrick Douglas toured the gay world in Pioneer Square and ventured into Heimbigner's Atlas Steam Bath, located on Occidental Street just behind the Double Header and the Casino. The bath, Douglas wrote, was "the most intriguing item" on his itinerary. He undressed, wrapped a towel around his waist, and walked down a narrow hallway past a three-foot-high replica of Michelangelo's David, all the while listening to the sounds of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. He made it as far as the steam room with its three tiers of tiled seats and men hazily visible in the mist. Then he bolted for the outside.[20]

When AIDS struck, Seattle had five gay bathhouses: the South End; Dave's; the Pines, just across the street from the Paramount Theater on Pine Street; the Zodiac Club on Pike Street; and the freshly opened Club Seattle, on Summit Avenue between Pike and Pine. Each projected a particular atmosphere. The South End,

having been around for decades, tended to attract the oldest and most sociable crowd, men who had grown comfortable going underground for their gay life. Club Seattle, at the other end of the spectrum, seemed to a *Gay News* writer to be for the gay yuppies, the clean-shaven muscular types who sometimes preferred tease to action. In between was Dave's, "feeling like an old shoe that has been worn a lot," a blue-collar type of bathhouse. The Pines, the *Gay News* writer labeled as the bath for drag queens; the Zodiac for the hairy-chested, sadomasochistically inclined "macho" men.[21]

When the *Seattle Times* published its first major article about the response of the city's gay men to AIDS, it turned to the bathhouses for comment, even illustrating its April 1983 story with a picture taken inside the Zodiac Club. The bath, the *Times* told its readers, "looks like an elderly hotel that has been painted black inside." It was an elderly hotel, the *Times* also noted, with a whirlpool, a weight room, a sauna, and a fantasy room with leather and chains. Standing beneath a huge mural of Superman's ripped muscles, as well as a discreetly smaller painting of a similarly sculpted naked man, the Zodiac's operator, James Brown, confessed that he was beginning to use more germicide and that his customers seemed to be showering more often. But otherwise, he said, they were feeling that the AIDS threat had been sensationalized.[22]

Deciding how to confront the role that bathhouses played in gay life was not only a public health issue, but also the tip of beginning to talk more outwardly in public about the kind of sex gay men were having. For some homosexuals, as well as heterosexuals, the bathhouse became the symbol—rhetorical and geographic—for what had suddenly gone wrong in gay life. In San Francisco, health department director Mervyn Silverman decided that closing the baths was one way to change sexual behavior. In Seattle, the question was whether to do the same. But was it really the public health department's responsibility to force a change in behavior? Or was the more important priority to provide AIDS education, testing, and treatment?

The gay community in Seattle was as divided as that in any other city about what was happening at the baths. In 1983, letters began to appear in the *Seattle Gay News,* criticizing in particular a new ad series from the Zodiac emphasizing photos of naked men. James Brown of the Zodiac angrily responded that some of the writers seemed to prefer pictures of men "dressed as women or in some equally unaggressive, impotent pose." He defiantly promised to keep placing the ads, and praised the *Gay News* for publishing them. David Poot, helping to raise money for the new Northwest AIDS Foundation, would later condemn the baths and those who went. "Bathhouses that are just letting unsafe sexual activity run rampant should be closed down," he told the *Post-Intelligencer.* Paul Kawata, then a board member of the Dorian Group, disagreed; he was concerned about the civil rights of those who wanted to frequent the baths. "Bathhouses don't give people AIDS," he would say. "People give people AIDS."[23]

In the dispute about the gay bathhouses, there was a bit of that old Seattle conflict over the city's red-light zones—the Arthur Dennys meeting up with the Doc Maynards and debating, in this case, what was now respectable for gay men to be doing and what was not, and whether to preserve a small remnant of the public geography where male-male sex could be pursued freely and legally.

Into that fray walked the first, and perhaps most unlikely, of what would become a string of streetwise gay—and lesbian—protagonists combating the virus in Seattle.

Larry Woelich was a burly man who had grown up out in the Missouri countryside in the 1940s and 1950s, a "ridge runner" as he referred to himself in a later interview, "the youngest of eight country hillbillies." "We didn't have running water in our house until I was ten," he would say, "and you went out to the six-shooter outhouse that was twenty feet behind the house, and you wiped your ass with this Sears wish book because toilet paper was a luxury you could not afford."[24] When he was just five years old, Woelich figured out he liked sex with men; very early in his little town of about four thousand people, he was known as the "homo" kid. By high school, the co-captain of the football team would pick him up after dates with the cheerleaders, then "we'd take one of the side roads out in the country and we'd get in the backseat and I'd satisfy him." Once, in 1960, a brother sent him to a psychiatrist. "I had the most wonderful good fortune," Woelich recalled. The psychiatrist did not try to force a change; instead he just warned Woelich that society would treat him like an outcast and what the psychiatrist could do "was to help me accept myself for who I was."

Eventually, Woelich was on the streets, kicked out by his brothers, fending for himself first in St. Louis and later in California. Jobs came and went; so did criminal charges for theft and lewd conduct. Alcohol. Drugs. He finished high school in a California prison and graduated to the Castro just as it was blossoming in the 1960s. Then, back in Missouri in 1970 to care for a father dying of cancer, he went to work for a new national chain of gay bathhouses, the Club Baths. In six months, he became manager of the St. Louis bath. There he would learn a lesson that would prove extremely valuable a decade and a half later in Seattle.

"The health department was harassing us," he said in the interview. "They would come out and say that John Doe was in your baths on such and such a date. He came down with gonorrhea or syphilis. We need to check your records." Then the health department inspectors would go through the lists of men who had checked into the bathhouse that day, ostensibly to track any potential sexual contacts that "John Doe" had had. After several months of visits, Woelich grew impatient. "I said, why don't we try to work out something here? You come here on a weeknight. People will volunteer for smears and blood. You take and run the test, and let's see exactly how many positives, or hot bloods, you get out of here, because I think you're wrong in your presumption. People are using us as a scapegoat and we're not guilty."

Perhaps surprisingly, the health department agreed to the plan.

"It turned out that I was right in that we weren't the cause," Woelich said. "People were getting the gonorrhea and syphilis elsewhere," but rather than be honest, those who had gotten infected were just saying, "I had contact at the baths."

The program worked so well, Woelich began it at other Club Bath outlets once he transferred to Dallas, then became the chain's general manager traveling to several different cities. In Dallas, the police once raided the bathhouse and arrested patrons while Woelich had the health inspectors there. "I asked that the health department be excused," he laughed.

Sent to Seattle to set up a new bathhouse right after Initiative Thirteen failed, Woelich at first had to wait when the financing collapsed, but by April 1981 he was back in charge of the project, and in the summer of 1982, at the most inauspicious time possible, the new Club Seattle opened.

Woelich never believed bathhouses had to be the shadowy, unspoken side of gay life. As much as any other gay business, they could be part of the community's infrastructure. When Stan Hill began promoting the new gay chamber of commerce, the Greater Seattle Business Association, Woelich became one of the founders, serving as the business group's vice president for two years. When the virus hit, he worked with the Northwest AIDS Foundation to search for its first managers; then, he joined the Chicken Soup Brigade as one of its directors, sometimes filling up grocery carts at Costco and conveniently forgetting to charge Chicken Soup for the food.

"We put our heads in the sand, initially, saying [AIDS] wasn't going to happen in Seattle," Woelich remembered. "Then it began to really hit. They began to threaten to close down [the bathhouses]. That's when I really put my nose to the grindstone and really began to kiss butt with the health department. I made changes in the baths, bringing the lights up, closing public areas, being almost monitorial in watching the people."

In late April 1984, Woelich and the operators of Seattle's other bathhouses met privately with Dr. Steve Helgerson, who by then had been placed in charge of the health department's AIDS Surveillance Project. In San Francisco, Silverman's conflict with the baths was already raging. In Seattle, the health department technically had licensing and inspection control over the cleanliness of any hot tubs in the baths, but not over the behavior that was occurring around the hot tubs. However, everyone knew that in a health crisis, extra authority from the city and county governments was available for the asking. Helgerson had been watching what Silverman was trying to do in San Francisco, but he was skeptical, partly because he had seen other health campaigns to change behavior, such as those to reduce smoking, have very limited impact for the amount of money spent. "We have been unsuccessful in changing behavior," he told the *Seattle Gay News.* "People who are intent on having intimate sexual contact are going to do it" whatever the health department says. Better, Helgerson suggested, to focus on the higher priorities. "People with AIDS are not interested in having us regulate their lives," he said.[25]

At the meeting, Woelich argued passionately that the baths could actually be centers for exactly what the health department believed was its priority: getting the word out about what gay men needed to do to avoid contracting AIDS. The issue was not sex, or even promiscuous sex. It was being safer. The baths could be used to distribute condoms. The baths could be used for testing.

A month later, Helgerson and the bath owners met to determine details. Woelich's previous experience and Helgerson's own skepticism fused. The health department, Helgerson agreed, would provide pamphlets and posters for education, even workshops for bathhouse employees and patrons. Bathhouses would circulate the information, a significant step since few bath operators around the country had ever reminded their patrons that anything about sex could be dangerous. At the moment, Helgerson said, the health department could not afford to provide free condoms; bathhouse owners would look for a way to do that.[26]

"People," Woelich recalled later, "thought I was crazy when I started putting condoms in the baths." Soon enough, he was even bringing in porn stars to run AIDS workshops.

"Had you asked me in '73 about gay men using condoms," Woelich said, "I would have laughed in your face, among other things. But in '84 and '85, I saw people changing their attitudes about sex. I was pleased being part of that."

With more money available by the 1990s, the health department would even send workers into the baths to offer free, anonymous testing for AIDS, reaching men unlikely to turn to traditional clinics. The bathhouses, for their part, made customers sign a promise to use condoms if they engaged in oral or anal sex—though the operators left it up to the men themselves to enforce the rule.[27]

In San Francisco, Silverman's approach would generate years of costly court battles, ultimately unsuccessful. Seattle had found a different way: keep the bathhouses part of the city's sexual geography, and make them speakers in the conversation. For his AIDS efforts, Woelich would be given an award from the Greater Seattle Business Association in 1991 and a Northwest AIDS Foundation citizen of the year award in 1993.

This was the tally after the first three years, the period in which it could be said that AIDS arrived in Seattle. In 1982, one person had been diagnosed with AIDS, the man who lived in both Seattle and San Francisco. He died. In 1983, eleven people were diagnosed. They all died. In 1984, sixty were diagnosed. Fifty-seven of them died within a handful of years.

Gradually, gay men who had the disease took the risk of coming out of the AIDS closet and giving a face to the local reporting, much as Peter Wichern had done for local homosexuals in general in 1967. Among those was Carl Orme. In November 1984, Orme discovered that his skin had suddenly begun to erupt in shingles. Each day that winter, he struggled to go to his work as an office manager

for the federal government's National Labor Relations Board, but by mid-February, he faced pneumonia and a three-week stay in the hospital. One drug caused a seizure and drove him into intensive care. The diagnosis: AIDS. Orme, a slight and gentle-appearing man with a mustache and an easy smile, eventually managed to go home with the help of his lover, James Finley. Together, they read books on the spirituality of dying. For a year, Orme became a local Bobbi Campbell, one of those with AIDS finally willing to be identified publicly. He addressed gay pride parades, churches, and Congressional hearings and even appeared on KING television. Finley was always with him. He too had been diagnosed with AIDS.

Toward the end, Orme spoke to a group of hospice nurses. "I ask myself," he said, "will the journey be peaceful? Can it be peaceful? Can it be loving, can it be giving, can it be without self-doubt and without beating myself over the head and being hard on myself?"

When he died on September 25, 1986, he was forty-five.

Almost exactly a year later, on September 11, 1987, his partner, James, died. He was thirty-nine.[28]

Despite the frequently heard warnings from Seattle health officials and gay leaders that no one should panic because of the arrival of AIDS, some did anyway.

In fall 1983, for example, an unverified "AIDS alert" list of about ten names of Seattle men believed to be carrying the virus appeared one morning on the seats of police cars, apparently circulated by police officers. About the same time, the police guild's newspaper, the *Guardian,* published an article saying that AIDS could be caught by any contact with mucous membranes, sexual or not, and that any body fluid, whether blood, urine, saliva, semen, or feces, could transmit the disease. Incensed by the list, gay activists demanded an apology; George Bakan of the AIDS Action Committee called it an "affront." The health department's Helgerson also criticized the list as "inappropriate" as well as unverified. The whole incident, Helgerson said, seemed to reflect the "hysteria surrounding AIDS," since police officers taking the reasonable precautions they should with any citizen would have no worry about contracting the virus. Helgerson added that he recognized none of the names as people participating in health department studies. As activists prepared to demonstrate outside the police department, the chief, Patrick Fitzsimons, quickly apologized and ordered an investigation.

In fact, the list was the same as one held by the health department's own employees at Harborview Medical Center. Whether a health worker had violated confidentiality and leaked the document was never clear; the health department quickly denied that any security had been breached just because the hospital had the list.[29]

The health department continuously tried to reassure people that the virus could not be caught casually. Hunter Handsfield, for example, pointed out in 1985 the results of a CDC study that examined 101 family members or housemates of people who had AIDS and who lived with them for more than two years, hugging them,

kissing them, sometimes even sharing toothbrushes. None had caught the virus. On the other hand, sometimes the health department's own statistics, or its means of gathering them and discussing their significance, frightened people. The same year Handsfield was being so reassuring, 1985, the department was reporting that one-third of the gay men it had treated for sexually transmitted diseases in its clinics in 1982 and 1983 had been exposed to the virus, and Handsfield told the *Times* that that figure had probably risen to 50 percent during 1984. The lead on the *Times* story promptly emphasized the speculative 50 percent and attributed it to "a new study." That prompted the health department to warn that there was no such thing as "safe sex" for gay men. Even open-mouth kissing was suspect. The problem with the statistic, as even Handsfield acknowledged, was that it reflected only the gay men going to the department's clinics; whether it actually represented all gay men in the city was neither known nor likely, since many were already practicing safer sex techniques and probably not going to the health department for checkups. That particular fact seemed lost in the fears. Even the *Seattle Gay News* headlined that 35 percent of "Seattle gays" had been infected. A month later, in February, when the results from 1984 were finally in and showed that a steady one-third—not 50 percent—of those who had gone to the health department had been exposed, the *Seattle Times* quoted health officials as saying that the statistic "suggested one-third of the gay community may be carrying the germ or have been exposed to it."[30]

Some incidents of fear bordered on the comical. When a trade journal for plumbers printed an article in December 1986 saying that plumbers might contract AIDS from cleaning drains and sewers, a Seattle company refused to go to the Northwest AIDS Foundation offices to unclog a sink, prompting the foundation's president at the time, lawyer Robert Rohan, to angrily complain, "What did they think they were going to do, have sex with the sink?" At Club Seattle, Woelich battled with a deliveryman from Frito-Lay who, after more than three years of making deliveries, suddenly decided to stop servicing the vending machines located inside the bathhouse. He was afraid he might contract AIDS simply by walking in and breathing the air. When the company tried shipping the products by mail, Woelich exploded and filed a complaint with the state Human Rights Commission. He eventually won five hundred dollars and a promise by Frito-Lay to educate its employees about how AIDS could be caught. Elsewhere in the Northwest, the comical bordered on the absurdly insulting. At an Indian guru's compound in Oregon that included six thousand residents, some from Seattle, followers were issued rubber gloves while a spokesman assured the *Seattle Times* that those with AIDS would be treated humanely. They would be isolated, the spokesman said, but if necessary, "they will have a disco or whatever."[31]

The health department was facing its own problems of fear. In 1986, once it had secured a $365,000 grant from the Centers for Disease Control to create a new AIDS Prevention Project to coordinate counseling and testing, it could not find anyone to rent space to the project. One office owner begged off saying that another

tenant needed the vacant space being advertised; the space was still vacant two months later. A real estate agent asked whether there was any way to pretend the project was for herpes instead of AIDS. Another agent offered a small space, saying it was probably the only thing she could locate. Still another building owner delayed an answer for more than a month. Others just refused. Out of ten offices the health department thought were suitable, only two owners agreed to rent. Ann Downer, one of the project's health educators, told the *Seattle Times* that the search itself had been a "living lesson" and an example of the "second epidemic of AIDS, the fear."[32]

Even securing enough doctors to treat the disease proved difficult. At first, most gay men saw Dr. Wood or one of two brothers, Tim or Tom Smith. Repeatedly, medical associations and health officials had to call for more doctors to attend workshops and begin treating patients.[33]

Activists began to talk of three epidemics: AIDS, the fear of AIDS, and then underlying it all, a fear of homosexuals, period.

Out on the streets, the fear showed itself in countless little incidents, particularly after the summer of 1985, when Rock Hudson died shortly after announcing that he had AIDS. That was the same year that a blood test to screen for the virus first began to be widely available. Now even those who still appeared healthy started to learn they had been exposed and that the virus was imperceptibly but relentlessly destroying their immune systems.

A gay man with Kaposi's sarcoma told the *Seattle Times* about an incident when he was in a drugstore, wearing sunglasses to mask the chemotherapy he was undergoing. A stranger blurted, "There's AIDS in Seattle. What if I sit next to one of them on the bus!" Another time, two men delivering a sofa overheard him talking about his treatment for AIDS. One dropped the couch and urged his partner to hurriedly leave.

Heterosexuals reported they were no longer eating at restaurants on Capitol Hill, or sharing glasses of water, or nibbling from the same appetizer trays.

At an AIDS hotline the health department had created to answer questions about the disease, calls began to arrive not just about the transmission of the disease but about being fired from jobs or having troubles with supervisors.[34]

Then in September 1985, Jim Wright, a Republican candidate for the chief executive's job in King County, made quarantining people with AIDS the centerpiece of his campaign. Wright, a Port of Seattle commissioner, also said he believed all medical and restaurant workers in the county should be tested for AIDS and fired if they had the virus. He attacked gay men, saying that since they had acquired the disease "through voluntary activities," they, and not Seattle or King County, should "shoulder the economic burden associated with their poor choices." In the primary, he lost. Some suggested gay Democratic voters had crossed over to vote for his opponent, Tim Hill, who eventually won the post in the general election.[35]

In Olympia, gay activists were not as successful. A *Seattle Times* news story noted

that in the state's capitol, AIDS was not simply a deadly disease. For Christian conservatives, political reporter Walter Hatch wrote, "AIDS has suddenly become a political weapon, being used to bludgeon gay-rights proposals to death." The Dorian Group, now being led by a new president, Jim Holm, still dutifully tried each year to secure a statewide law to prevent job discrimination, but now encountered the AIDS argument. For example, Ken Steely, the head of the Bill of Rights Legal Foundation, a lobby representing evangelical Christians, told Hatch that if heterosexuals had to hire homosexuals or do business with them, they would be exposed to the virus. Homosexuals, he said, were clearly to blame for the disease, whatever the evidence emerging about heterosexual transmission. "They brought it in," he said, "and they fostered it." Holm complained of an "orchestrated campaign" to exploit fear. The Dorians would succeed at heading off the calls for quarantine and would be able to secure state funding for various AIDS education and treatment programs, but the rest of the civil rights agenda would have to wait.[36]

Whenever Handsfield and other health department officials had to, which seemed repeatedly, they dutifully reiterated their mantra to the politicians: The virus could not be contracted casually. Education, not regulation. Treatment, not punishment.

From 1985 through 1987, when the virus could be said to have settled in, the numbers rose frighteningly—never as bad as the statistics in San Francisco, of course, but still startling percentage increases. In 1985, the number of new cases diagnosed in Seattle and King County passed a landmark: the symbolic 100, or to be exact, 104. The next year, the number almost doubled to 186, then to 274. More than 90 percent of those individuals would be dead within a few years after their diagnosis; only a few would still be living at the turn of the century.

In September 1985, the same month Jim Wright called for a quarantine, Richard Hennigh decided to talk publicly about having AIDS. It wasn't easy; he had grown up in eastern Washington, had married at one point and had a daughter. Also, having been elected "Mr. Leather of Washington" in 1985, Hennigh held a very visible role in that part of gay drag culture emphasizing boots and chains over pumps and beads. Hennigh had interwoven elements of both, becoming known in the local gay bars for the way he juxtaposed street mime and intricate geisha-like fan dances with a uniform that included a leather harness, a black leather cap, and his own muscular, well-haired chest. Sometimes he danced six hours at a time; the audiences loved it. But since 1981, Hennigh had experienced one illness after another: shingles, hepatitis, what his doctor thought was an entrenched sinus infection, and, finally, pneumocystis carinii. Hennigh knew what people would think: leather and AIDS and promiscuity—they went together, didn't they? In an interview with the *Seattle Gay News,* he pointed out that that was false. "I'm the most conservative gay man around," he said. "I can count on my fingers the number of

lovers I've had. I wasn't promiscuous. We leather folks get a lot of the blame, and it's just not true." More than four hundred people, including leathermen from across the country, attended a benefit in his honor held at one of the bars, Sparks, where Hennigh had worked.

By the winter of 1987, he weighed less than 120 pounds.

When Richard Hennigh died on April 20, 1987, he was thirty-seven.[37]

If only they knew . . . If only they paid attention . . . If only they changed . . .

Practical as Steve Helgerson's decision had been to avoid frittering the health department's resources trying to regulate the unregulatable in the bathhouses, it still left many questions unanswered: What could be done to change the behaviors in Seattle that were transmitting the disease? Could the number of new infections be cut, even as the old ones were making themselves terrifyingly visible? What, if any, kind of education campaign would work?

At first, as scientists learned more about how the virus moved from person to person, the emphasis became simply getting the information out. Just tell people, the thought went, and their behavior would change. The virus was in the blood, so be careful with blood. Screen the donors. Monitor transfusions. Use caution around other people's bloody noses or open wounds. The virus was in the semen, so avoid semen. Or at least the semen of partners with whom you were not monogamous. When in doubt, abstain from sex.

It was simple, really, especially once scientists confirmed in 1985 that condoms could block the virus. As simple a message as any in a first grade health class. Wash your hands. Brush your teeth. Use a condom. Abstain.

For a while, the new cadre of AIDS educators beginning to form both in Seattle and across the country seemed to believe that the "information model" would be enough. They began coining terms that people could use to easily name, and thus remember, what they were supposed to do or not do, catalogued into lists on brochures or posters. Sometimes it was called "risk reduction," a bureaucratic label that, while accurate, probably appealed to no one, least of all gay men still interested in the adventure or play of sex. In New York and San Francisco, gay activists began promoting a manual called "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic," but they did not have a clear term to refer to this new kind of sex. Bobbi Campbell's group, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, published one of the earliest booklets, referring to "playing fair" and having "fair sex."

Eventually, two different types of information rhetoric emerged, in Seattle as well as the rest of the nation. The first was the government's, which referred to clinical descriptions: penises, semen, anal or oral intercourse, condoms, risk reduction. The mass media was nervous about any explicit sexual descriptions, so it either adopted the government terms or blurred them further, vaguely telling readers and viewers that scientists thought AIDS could be transmitted by "intimate sexual contact," or even sidestepping an explanation altogether.[38] Gay activists, on the other

hand, gradually decided that street jargon for sex might be more effective: cocks, cum, fucking, sucking, rubbers, rimming, fisting.

So, there would be two rhetorical campaigns—partly because the government and media terminology never seemed to keep up with all the imaginative ways people could have sex, and all the questions they would have when they found an AIDS educator in a classroom, on the street, or at the baths. If oral intercourse was dangerous, as the government said, who was most at risk, the one giving head or the one getting head? Was the "top" or the "bottom" most likely to transmit the virus? "Bodily fluids" covered a wide range. Was spit as dangerous a bodily fluid as precum? Sometimes the government did not even have words for what people were doing—no easily recognizable clinical terms for "rimming" or "fisting," for example, leading Helgerson to have to blend the language occasionally, as in this comment in the *Seattle Gay News* in 1984 when he was describing problem behaviors: "Receptive anal intercourse involving the exchange of bodily fluids, rimming and fisting are examples of risk factors. . . . Gay males who are sexually active with multiple sex partners and who exchange bodily fluids with them" are most "at risk."[39]

One of the first times that the Seattle media used what would become the most popular slogan occurred when Bobbi Campbell, during his 1983 visit to the city, told the *Times* reporter that he believed people with AIDS could still have "safe sex." Gradually, throughout 1984 and 1985, the term spread until by 1986 it was the dominant way to refer to what the government was still calling "risk reduction strategies."

Quickly, though, AIDS educators found that it was one thing to teach the new rules, and quite another for individuals to actually change behavior. Lovers and new encounters did not necessarily talk beforehand about what kind of sex to have; they just had it. A romantic or lustful silence could enhance the action, especially at the bathhouses. Also, all the rules being propounded by doctors sounded bureaucratic, and everyone knew that no government agency really wanted to promote sex between men.

Were the rules themselves homophobic? Could AIDS educators really be trusted? In an epidemic, could anyone?

David Poot learned his diagnosis not from a doctor but from an insurance company in early 1986. On the advice of his lawyer, he had applied for an extra one hundred thousand dollars in life insurance coverage because he had purchased a new condominium; the insurance company promised that the blood test it wanted would be checked only for signs of the hepatitis Poot had suffered a decade earlier. Instead, the company also tested for the AIDS antibodies, and then denied the policy when Poot tested positive.

Poot was anything but a pushover. At six-and-a-half feet tall, he was built like a basketball star, looked a bit Kennedyesque, and had already created three reputations: professionally as one of the city's leading landscape designers (six Seattle

Symphony Designer Showcase homes to his credit); politically as a creator of the Northwest AIDS Foundation, a member of the governor's Commission on Human Rights, and president of the Greater Seattle Business Association; and socially as a flamboyant and very out gay man who enjoyed wearing a T-shirt that said, "Queen of the Universe." At his well-landscaped home on Capitol Hill, its secluded garden populated by statues and fountains, Poot often staged private receptions for groups like the foundation or for politicians such as California senator Alan Cranston, whose presidential bid he had once helped.

Clearly, the life insurance company had picked on the wrong person. Infuriated, Poot sued. The company ended up not only issuing the policy, but paying a settlement to end the suit.

For Poot, it was an ugly blip in a life that otherwise seemed filled with beauty and grace. As a child in West Seattle, he had early shown an inclination for designing, relocating the plants in his parents' yard and using his allowance money for begonias. He eventually saw his home near Volunteer Park featured in *Architectural Digest* and *Sunset Magazine;* his Hawaiian residence included an acre for unusual tropical plants, sited personally by Poot. At one of the AIDS foundation's awards ceremonies, he showed up with Hawaiian ti leaves, which he told the audience were believed to provide healing and protection. One foundation official remembered that he passed out more than a thousand.

Poot lived for eight years beyond his diagnosis. When he died in April 1994, David Poot was fifty-three.[40]

The same month Poot heard his diagnosis from the insurance company, January 1986, the Northwest AIDS Foundation deployed what would be the first major education campaign in Seattle to combine the staid "information model" of medical advice with Madison Avenue marketing and street activism. Using a federal grant routed through the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the foundation turned to an ad agency and a local gay graphic artist, Lee Sylvester, for ideas that would sell on the street, but, because of the federal funding involved, would not use language as explicit as that being used by gay activists in other cities. The agency decided to capitalize on the notion of "safety" as well as on the idea that many gay men were catching AIDS by leading a "fast lane" life when it came to sex. Combining the two ideas produced the metaphor of highway safety. The foundation put its volunteer coordinator, an affable and talkative man named Carl Wagner, in charge of organizing "safe sex" strike teams that would go onto the streets and into the bars and baths to hand out small, one-inch round, black-and-yellow buttons portraying a road-curve traffic sign with its "S."

Soon enough, the buttons blanketed Capitol Hill, even becoming so popular that at one point, according to a foundation worker, a drag queen made off with several thousand, hoping to turn them into a sequined safe-sex dress. The foundation got them back only by convincing him to make a halter top instead.[41]

Three posters targeted particular subsets of gay men. A picture of a traffic detour sign with wording saying "AIDS is not the end of the road" was intended to reach those who had quit sex all together, panicked at the thought of touching another gay man. A road dip sign with the text "A word about those who won't shift gears for safer sex" was aimed at men still ignoring the warnings. The final poster, the picture of the road curve, read "the gay community takes a turn for the better." That one was for everyone, to emphasize that practicing "safe sex" could produce a better sexual experience, not a worse one.

Wagner's teams also handed out black-and-yellow cards listing the "Rules of the Road." The "safest" sex, the rules said, was mutual masturbation, dry kissing, body rubbing, and unshared sex toys. "Possibly safe" sex included intercourse with condoms, deep kissing, and "external water sports." Unsafe sex was fisting, rimming, oral sex, "water sports, swallowed," and shared sex toys.

But why the buttons, and not just the cards or posters, which, after all, contained the important information? The foundation's first ad in the *Seattle Gay News* explained the reason. "How to talk about such a delicate subject" as safe sex? the ad asked. "Here's how. Let the Safety Pin make your statement. . . . Wear a Safety Pin. You'll find yourself in good company." It was clever. The idea was not only to rivet a new set of rules into gay men's minds, but to amplify an old identification system that some gay men, particularly in bars, had already been using—a code of placing differently colored handkerchiefs in either the left or right back pocket to indicate preferences for the types of sex enjoyed. Now, the foundation hoped, those who intended to practice safe sex could simply wear the pin. No embarrassing negotiations, no "delicate talk" beforehand. And the more pins in a bar or on the street, the greater the peer pressure on all gay men to behave accordingly.[42]

The foundation also hoped to move the conversation past all the "do nots" that had been issuing from the government. "It puts a positive focus on dealing with the issue," Jack Jones, the foundation's president, told the *Seattle Times.* "Before there hasn't been anything positive. We're trying to emphasize a viable option, and our only real option."[43] In the *Seattle Gay News,* the foundation tried to make the campaign even more upbeat, emphasizing that Wagner, the coordinator of the program, was going to have fun with his highway signs. The story, written partially by the foundation itself, joked, "If you're one of those who has the impression that the Northwest AIDS Foundation has tended to be peopled by somewhat stiff types who are happiest with cocktail party chit-chat and yuppie networking . . . go talk to Carl and you'll get over your stereotypes fast. . . . In these somewhat dismal times, it's good to be reminded that laughter is infectious and Carl knows how to turn the energy of anxiety into the release of upbeat talk and action."[44]

The campaign's rhetoric was threefold: to teach the rules, to directly influence changes in interpersonal behavior, and to make the foundation's own messages seem more credible and more personal.

But could success really be measured? A year later, when the "Rules of the Road"

The discovery of the AIDS virus in 1981 presented the city's homosexual community with not only a medical challenge, but also questions about how to discuss sex in education campaigns. The Northwest AIDS Foundation launched its first prevention campaign subtly, with a "Rules of the Road" metaphor urging gay men to use condoms, 1986. *(Geoff Manasse, Northwest AIDS Foundation)*

theme ended, a foundation official told the *Gay News* that he could not point to any statistics proving a certain number of people had avoided AIDS because of the Safety Pins. But, he said, awareness had increased. That would always be the problem for gay AIDS educators—to know, when they saw their friends dying around them, whether their efforts really made any difference. The foundation tried to collect proof at the 1987 gay pride parade, passing around questionnaires. Some 60 percent of the 231 people who responded said they had changed their behavior, and of those, one-third said it was due to safe sex education. That made the educators feel good—except for that other 40 percent, a sizeable number considering that the epidemic was now six years old.[45]

At the start of the "Rules of the Road" campaign, the executive director of the foundation, Bea Kelleigh, had told the *Seattle Times* that only a single measure counted. "If one person does not get sick as a result of the campaign," she said, "it will have paid for itself."

Surprisingly, that was not just a corny sound bite. It was true. The campaign and all the little buttons Wagner was distributing would cost $100,000. Doctors were saying that caring for one person with AIDS was already running up to $150,000.

Michael Gallanger had been a lover with Jack Jones, the attorney who helped create the Northwest AIDS Foundation. Gallanger's other two loves were carpentry—he worked remodeling houses—and his dog, Abigail. After Gallanger became too sick to work, he taught another young man the trade and then gave him his tools. Abigail he fretted about. "He was worried about leaving her," Jones recalled. When he died in December 1986, Michael Gallanger was thirty-three, and Jones inherited Abigail.

Another man with AIDS, Andy Cruz, had moved with his family from Guam to Tacoma when he was three years old. In January 1987, he asked to be let free from a hospital bed so he could go to the Jesuits' St. Joseph's Church on Capitol Hill. He said he wanted to attend a Mass, his first in more than two years. He rolled in in a wheelchair, intravenous tubes and an oxygen tank at his side. He died a month later.[46]

Andy Cruz was just twenty-three.

And the epidemic was just beginning.