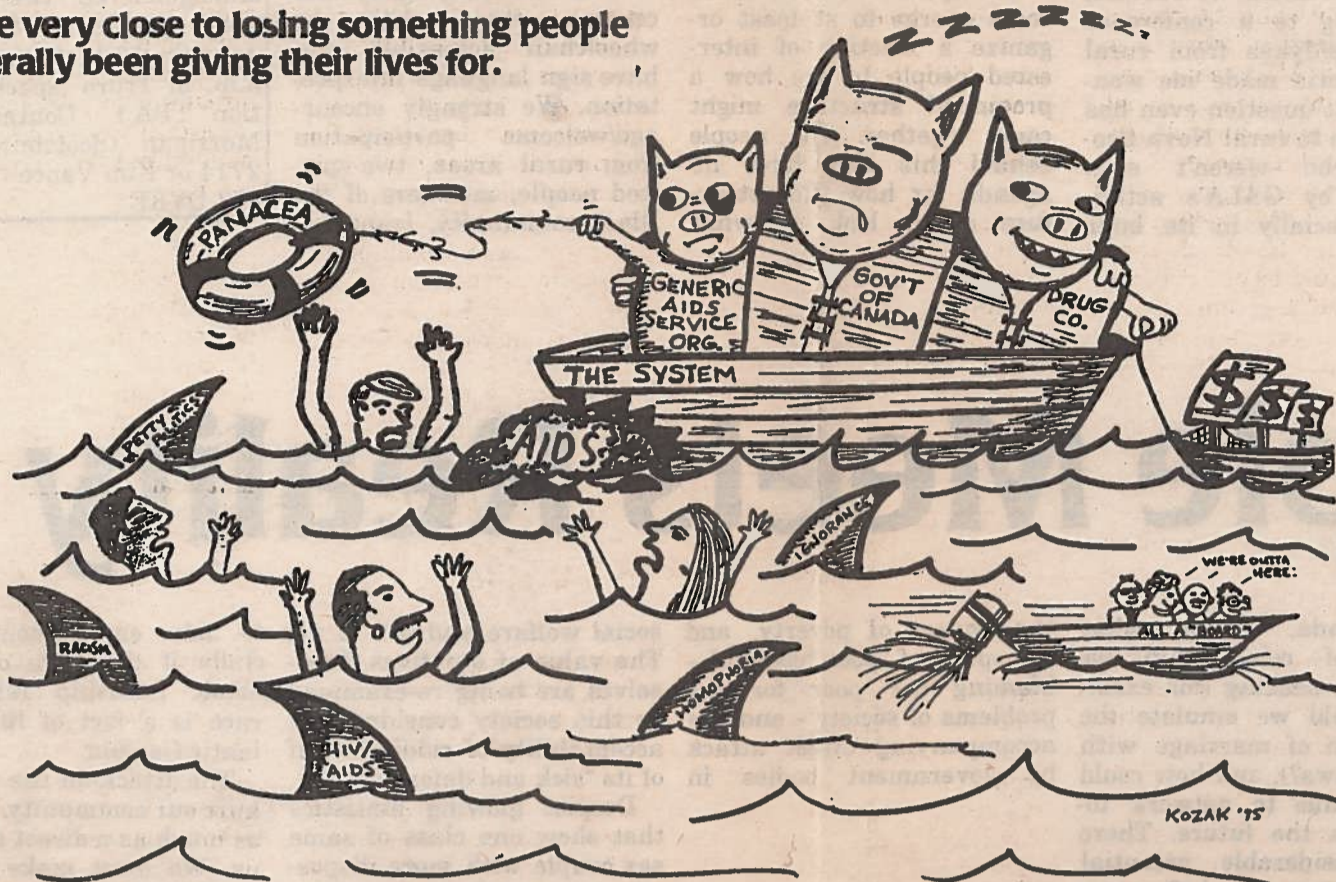


Perspective: AIDS, Homophobia and Other Stories

We came very close to losing something people have literally been giving their lives for.



by Ross Boutilier

In the last few months a significant struggle has come to a head in the AIDS Coalition of Nova Scotia. Four board members have resigned amidst bitter acrimony, and the ramifications of their departures are being felt throughout that organization and beyond. Accusations of homophobia, racism and classism were raised while strident, public criticism of the organization was made by at least one departing board member.

There have been allegations that the AIDS Coalition board has chosen to overlook potential financial wrong-doing by two gay male employees, regardless of counter legal opinions, and findings by the sponsoring funding organization. Related to this has been an

ongoing attack on the high profile role gay activists are taking in the organization, based on the belief that the organization would be more successful in its fundraising and mission if it were less visibly associated with gay and lesbian community action.

This in turn is part of a larger struggle around whether the organization would have a generic or community focussed outreach program. Would it have programs directed to gay/bisexual men, women, or the Black community, or would it have a program that did not require the visible presence of those communities?

Finally, the balance between support programs for PHAs and prevention and educational activities would, even in the best of times,

generate considerable struggle. The atmosphere at the AIDS Coalition became so polarized in recent months that it can easily be argued that the organization was in near paralysis.

The crisis arose because of dollars, specifically provincial funding dollars, which pushed the PWA Coalition of Nova Scotia, with its history and focus on activism and support, into an difficult and contentious wedding with AIDS Nova Scotia. The issues contested are complex, confused, and are deeply buried in the history of the AIDS crisis and the struggle for gay and lesbian equality. What would be the consequences if the gay community were pushed out of the fight against AIDS? Would the closet door be slammed in our faces?

RECENT BACKGROUND

As report in last month's Wayves, on September 21, 1995 two employees of the AIDS Coalition of Nova Scotia were suspended with pay by the Executive Committee until allegations of "financial impropriety" could be investigated. Neither Robert Allen, Executive Director, or James Shedden, Coordinator of the Men's Project, were given any information initially as to why they were suspended. Both Mr. Allen and Mr. Shedden are out gay activists.

The "financial impropriety" which Mr. Allen and Mr. Shedden were challenged on involved the payment to themselves for consulting

work done in excess of their regular jobs, for a specific federally funded project, and amounted to a payment of \$1500 each. The practice of billing extra work was consistent with the practices of employees of the PWA Coalition, the organization Mr. Allen and Mr. Shedden worked for until the merged organization took over. The new organization has no policy on the matter.

Consultations with program specialists with Health Canada, the funding agency, revealed that although there may have been some creative accounting involved, they were satisfied with their investigation; there was no fraud, and no further action was needed. Further, legal opinions sought both by the executive of the AIDS Coalition and lawyers for Mr. Allen and Mr. Shedden indicated that there was no defensible basis for the suspensions, and that the AIDS Coalition was putting itself at risk for a civil suite for wrongful dismissal were they to fire the two employees.

An additional development was a strong move by then AIDS Coalition Vice-President Ross Haynes, former President of AIDS Nova Scotia, to have AIDS Coalition President Wilson Hodder resign on the pretext that Mr. Hodder had not taken action several months earlier when he learned of the consulting payments via another senior staff member. Mr. Hodder is a very high profile AIDS and gay activ-

ist, and is former President of the PWA Coalition. Haynes was himself object of a petition circulating within the client base of the AIDS Coalition called for his resignation on the basis that he was the force behind the suspensions. In fact, Mr. Haynes was involved in three attempts to fire Mr. Hodder.

A meeting of the AIDS Coalition on October 11 led to a decision to revoke the suspensions. The board accepted the explanations of Mr. Allen and Mr. Shedden, and accepted that matters raised by the situation required the board set future direction and policy. Mr. Haynes presented his resignation at that time, and three other board members resigned shortly thereafter.

In his letter of resignation, and in the days following in widely circulated letters to both the federal and provincial governments, Mr. Haynes took strong issue with the AIDS Coalition decision on the suspension matter, as well as with the direction the AIDS organization was taking. He attacked the community based approach to AIDS education, which he characterized as a special interests' driven way to get HIV/AIDS money. Mr. Haynes argued that AIDS organizations should evolve more into the mainstream of society, with less emphasis on such things as sexuality.

Mr. Haynes has been a vocal critic of community based education since the two organizations began merging. The example of the Black Outreach project sheds a light on the passions that surround this issue.

THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

Three years ago the PWA Coalition determined its education effort directed at the Black community in Nova Scotia was going nowhere. At the simplest level, Black people were simply not showing up to hear white people talk about AIDS. Still, AIDS was clearly going to be a Black issue, if for no other reason than denial: to most Blacks, AIDS in Canada had a white gay male face. The additional interrelated issues of poverty, injection drug use and unsafe sex are all realities in the Black community. Education that effectively reached that community had to be a priority.

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The coalition hired Kim Bernard, a Black woman, to start a program that would allow Blacks to take ownership of their own AIDS education. Ms. Bernard was expected to go out into her community to build a network of advisors and connections. Her major initial accomplishment was a Needs Assessment that she presented 18 months ago to a PWA Coalition meeting. Ross Haynes was in attendance at that meeting and he attacked Ms. Bernard's report on the basis that it was "targeted education" and was not the best way to use resources. Mr. Haynes characterized the report itself in highly negative terms.

Ms. Bernard indicated that Mr. Haynes' vocal opposition was the first indication her project would face serious challenges, but suggested that Mr. Haynes was simply someone who vocalized what others were thinking. Ms. Bernard indicated that she was thereafter faced with constantly justifying the project, even as she sought to actually do the work as the sole employee assigned to it. This has been echoed by Dina Noseworthy, who currently has the job of Black Outreach Coordinator.

Ms. Bernard has stated that the Black Outreach project has not been hurt by these challenges because people from her community have come out and challenged these voices, bring Black issues to the fore when needed, and insisting that "We're here, and we're not going away."

Is Racism a factor in how much support the Black Outreach Project gets? Ms. Bernard suggests it certainly is, and it is clearly reflected and indeed institutionalized in the health care system. Consider who runs this system. Do Black people feel comfortable in a doctor's office? Are Black people, sensitive to stereotypes and the stigma arising from the incidence of AIDS in Africa, likely to hold back in testing for or revealing their HIV status?

In the matter of Racism, are AIDS organizations reflective of the larger health care system? It is worth asking, perhaps, why is it that the Black Outreach Project receives less funding than the Women and AIDS project, another targeted-education project. It is indeed notable that the Women and AIDS project, though not without its own problems, has not been labeled as "special interest" driven nor has it been targeted for specific criticism in this debate.

Racism is mixed into many

issues, and is a reality in the community at large. To expect the AIDS organization to be free of racism is simply unrealistic. The question is a matter of degree. Failure to understand the needs of the Black community when it comes to AIDS education, when it is clear that AIDS education with a white face does not work, and when lives clearly depend on it, is racist.

Ms. Bernard's belief is that effective AIDS education directed to the Black community must be about Black people feeling comfortable with themselves, and it must speak to "self-identified" Black people.

It is instructive to review the above paragraphs replacing 'Black' with 'gay' or 'poor'.

The fact that the Black Outreach Project was initiated by the PWA Coalition is not an accident. The PWA Coalition was a very different organization than its partner, AIDS Nova Scotia. Their differences run deep.

HISTORY LESSON

In the mid-eighties a loose group of people concerned about AIDS began a Halifax based organization known as the Metro Area Committee on AIDS, or MacAIDS. Discontent by clients and volunteers that MacAIDS was not putting enough emphasis on support matters and political action in support of PHAs led to the birth of the Nova Scotia Persons with AIDS Coalition

June 21, 1988. The division was adversarial. It was perceived by the splintering group that there was no support from MacAIDS for gay issues or AIDS activism in general.

A significant factor in coming to terms with AIDS for many gay men has been the additional pain society places on them, stigmatizing them as deserving of the illness because of their sexuality. Coming out gay and coming out as HIV+ became equated, emotional, and explosive issues. Anyone valuing the closet was a collaborator with the oppressor.

involved, it simply was a safer place to be homophobic, especially if that homophobia were self directed.

Financially better off individuals generally could associate more comfortably with MacAIDS, while those more driven by financial need were likely to knock on the doors of the PWA Coalition.

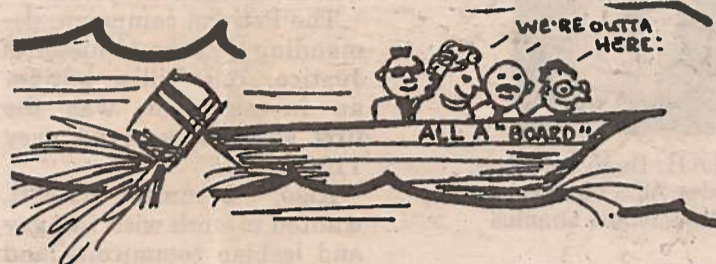
It was not uncommon for people to come 'out' at MacAIDS and migrate from there to the PWA Coalition. It was also not uncommon for people to circulate between the organizations. It was also not uncommon for the

tion), and a unique understanding of how to go about doing it, made the Coalition the natural place to incubate other outreach projects.

Forcing the two organizations to join was clearly risking serious, open conflict. Was homophobia part of it? In as much as internalized homophobia already polarized positions, it certainly was. Failure to understand the needs of the gay/bisexual communities, when more lives are at stake, certainly is homophobia. To argue that for the organization to be successful it should de-emphasize its gay face is homophobic: if a sanitized AIDS organization would be much more successful than a visibly gay-activist one, why is it that the PWA Coalition was every bit as successful as MacAIDS/AIDS Nova Scotia?

In the shakedown that has come to pass at the AIDS Coalition, it is worth noting that it is the stakeholders, the people with the illness, the people who's communities are struggling with the illness, that remain. Those who resigned are generally healthy, generally well off, and generally able to go elsewhere to contribute to society.

The AIDS Coalition has been hurt by this crisis, but it is still very much there and very eager to get back to work. It is our responsibility to come to its support, to help make it work, to help in its work, and to help build its future.



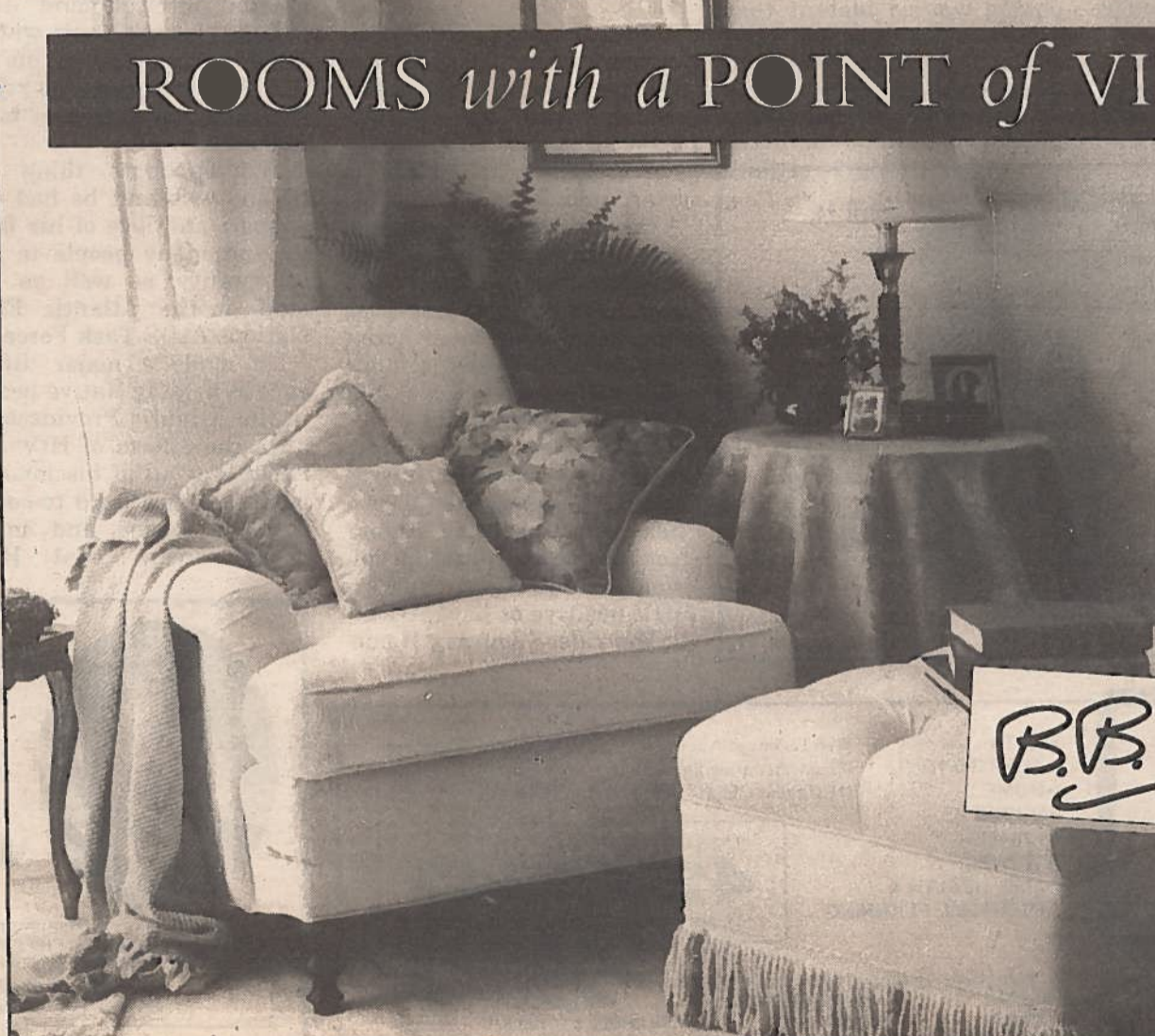
Queer activism was a central part of the identity of the new coalition. MacAIDS was left a smaller, and arguably hurt organization. MacAIDS eventually became AIDS Nova Scotia.

Those not gay, or those in the closet either about their sexuality or HIV status were generally attracted to MacAIDS. It remained 'respectable' (this word itself a highly homophobic term.) It became a haven for closeted people, and profoundly reflected their closeted values. This is not to say it did not have excellent programs with outstanding people

organizations to cooperate, though each side was more than a little wary of the other. There were significant benefits, in fact, arising from the constructive tension between the organizations.

The PWA Coalition did not attract just gay men. Notably, Randy and Janet Connors, two high-profile members, clearly chose to make common cause with others they perceived were considered by society to be forgettable, yet were unwilling to be quiet. Similarly, a strong belief in the need for targeted education (a founding plank of the Coali-

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