



George Smith

May 7, 1935 – Nov. 6, 1994

If I could put it all into a sentence, I would say that George Smith was one of the most brilliant people that I have ever met and that he was always a supporter of the oppressed. But even that sentence could not do justice to George's massive legacy, not just to the struggle against AIDS but to human dignity.

George graduated with distinction from McGill University and he was encouraged to apply to Harvard University and to McGill's medical school by his professors. Instead, he chose a life of political and sociological enquiry. He used his training as an ethnographer to make visible the hidden world of agencies that controlled people's lives. George put his skills and findings in the service of despised minorities – initially these were gay men in the late 1970s and early 1980s, later to be followed by HIV-positive people.

In the mid-1980s as the AIDS epidemic blossomed across Canada, governments of the day were largely indifferent to the suffering. If they paid any attention to what was called 'the gay plague,' it was to make sure that HIV did not break out of its initial 'risk groups' and infect the 'innocent.'

To shift the focus to helping people with HIV, George used his training and knowledge to form a remedial and grand strategy. He brought diverse activists together and, with community activist and intellectual Tim McCaskell, formed

Canada's first AIDS activist group – AIDS ACTION NOW! Their demonstrations, street theatre and guerilla press conferences were always successful in garnering sympathetic media attention and, ultimately, public support.

Next, George, together with other activists such as McCaskell and University of Toronto professor Michael Lynch, pressured the Federal bureaucracy into allowing promising experimental HIV therapies into Canada so that doctors could treat their patients. George helped to draft policy papers that would contest and rewrite the rules for conducting clinical trials with HIV-positive people in Canada, making them fairer by discouraging the use of placebos.

Being an ethnographer allowed him to penetrate the inner sanctum of bureaucracies, medical associations, universities and corporations. He was able to take advantage of their competing interests to make them serve the treatment needs of PHAs.

One of George's legacies is CATTIE, which together with lawyer Alan Cornwall, he co-founded to help meet the complex and changing information requirements of HIV-positive people. George did all of this work while doing the research necessary for two PhDs at the University of Toronto. We can only marvel at such drive and vision.

In addition to all of this work, somehow George found time to be my mentor, tutoring me on a wide range of subjects from the principles of adult education to politics, media analysis, mathematics and philosophy. He would always be interested in making sense of the research papers that I brought home almost every night from my foraging in the University's Science library. He described this work as "Going to medical school at night." Our medical allies nodded in mirth and wonder.

My partner George passed away in November 1994, before HAART was available. But thanks to the nutritional expertise of Chester Myers, PhD, the Traditional Chinese Medicine of Dr. David Bray, the experimental therapies made available by Doug MacFadden, MD, PhD, and the knowledge that I had accumulated over the years, we were able to preserve his intellectual functions and give him good quality of life until the very end.

We have lost so many gracious, talented, brilliant and beautiful souls to AIDS. They would be proud of what has been achieved and accomplished. The memory of their struggle in the face of so much adversity is a testament to the resiliency of the human spirit. It inspires me to this day.

—*Sean R. Hosein*