

Saskatchewan's independent newsmagazine

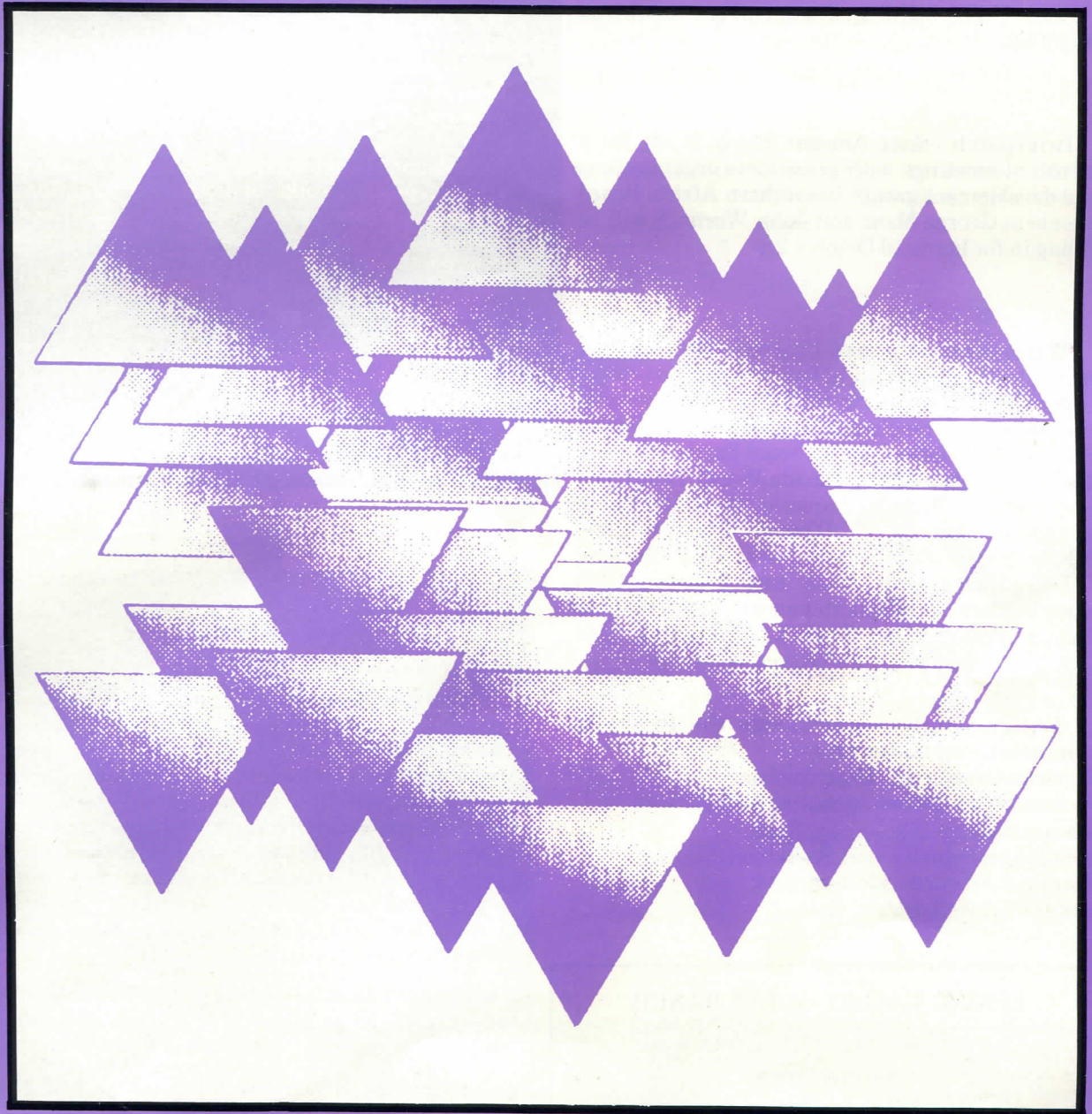
BRIARPATCH

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SEXUAL ORIENTATION



Gays and Lesbians speak out

- Nicaragua • Farm foreclosures •
- Impact of the Waffle on the NDP •

AIDS activists:

Rocking the boat

by GLEN BROWN

Russell Armstrong has spent most of his 25 years in solidly middle-class surroundings. He's white, he's male, and he'd like to be mobile in an upward direction. He is uncomfortable with radical politics. This summer he was arrested and charged with trespassing while protesting delays in the release of a promising AIDS treatment.

For many North American gay men, AIDS has provided a brutally clear view of oppression. Sure, the social oppression of a heterosexist society was very real long before the AIDS crisis. But for some, privileges of gender, race, and class gave the option of staying out of political struggles, or of colouring those struggles with a decidedly liberal hue. A civil rights tinker here, an attitude adjustment there, and this system would work just fine.

AIDS has rocked the boat, even for white, middle-class gays. For everyone affected by AIDS, fighting back has taken on life-and-death urgency.

When the crisis came, the government and health-care industry did not come to the rescue; in fact, they aided and abetted preventable deaths. Gay men watched in disbelief as their friends became ill or died and no one developed prevention campaigns. "Public health" agencies stood back to let the virus spread rather than

show condoms on TV. Health ministers sniffed about immoral lifestyles rather than funding safer sex or needle-use campaigns. Researchers and bureaucrats kept new treatments on the back burner, letting hundreds die rather than change the rules on releasing new drugs.

It seemed gay men and other threatened communities were dispensable — just as the poor, people of colour, women, and disabled people have always been treated.

It's hard to describe the AIDS devastation within the gay and lesbian community. The sheer number of lives lost, in such a concentrated way, would be enough to numb any community; when combined with societal hysteria, increased sexual oppression, and government indifference, the crisis becomes horrific.

Gay men - and, in a crucial alliance, lesbians - have put their resources to work to organize where the system had failed them. Innovative, erotic safer sex campaigns have begun to reduce the spread of HIV (the virus thought to cause AIDS) in the gay community. Lesbian- and gay-initiated support services try to plug the gaping holes in the social "safety net," providing everything from financial assistance to counselling for HIV-infected people.

The gay and lesbian community has also organized politically to combat AIDS. Grass-roots organizations like AIDS ACTION NOW! in Toronto, AIDS Coalition

AIDS activists invade the International AIDS conference in Montreal.



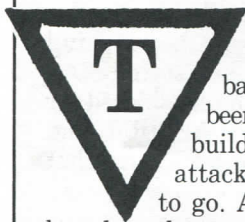
photo: Philip Hannan

To Unleash Power (ACTUP) in many U.S. cities, and others have used demonstrations, lobbying, and civil disobedience to challenge indifference and inaction. Much of the focus has been on treatment improvements for people living with AIDS or HIV. AIDS activists have become their own health-care experts, insisting on input into the sacred medical process, and fundamentally challenging the notions of free-enterprise medicine.

AIDS activists have scored some remarkable, life-extending victories over the past year. Activists have been at the forefront of treatment improvements that are challenging the assumed fatality of HIV and AIDS. Drug companies, government agencies, doctors, and researchers have all been forced to listen to people living with AIDS (PLWAs) in making their plans. The Canadian and U.S. governments have radically changed the rules on access to experimental treatments and on drug research.

AIDS activism has begun to expand beyond the gay and lesbian community. HIV infection patterns in the U.S. provide grim foreshadowing to trends just beginning in Canada. While the rate of new infections may start to slow among gay males, it will increase for women, the poor, and people of colour. The resources, knowledge, and mobilization in the gay and lesbian community could prove invaluable to other communities facing the crisis.

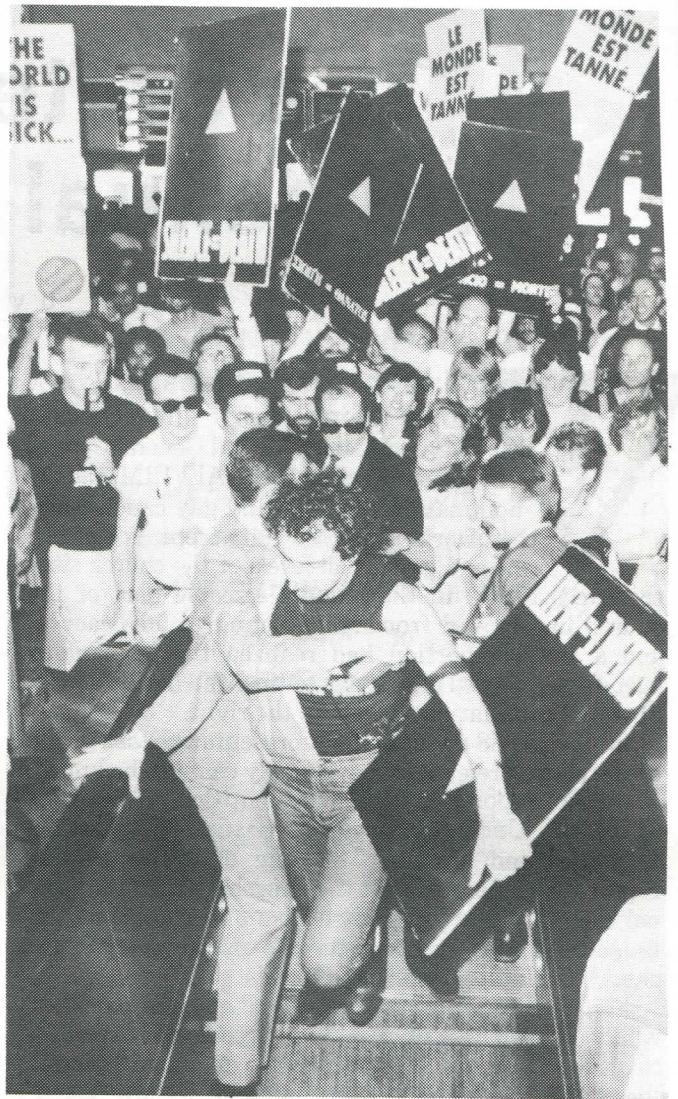
"Could" is the operative word.



There is still a long and critical struggle ahead on AIDS, to combat the virus and the victimization that's been constructed to accompany it. Alliance building — between communities under attack and their allies — still has a long way to go. AIDS community and activist groups based in the gay male community have been slow to tackle women's AIDS issues, needle-use education, or the issues of visible or language minorities. In the exhausting fight for basic survival, short-term goals can crowd the agenda, and government funding of community AIDS organizations has made many of them more docile.

AIDS organizing has begun to bridge some gulfs, and there is potential for much more. The AIDS activist movement has protested the scapegoating of prostitutes and mistreatment of prisoners. Prompted by lesbians and people of colour in the movement, activists have begun to address sexism and racism in society's response to AIDS. They've seen how poverty affects both the spread of HIV and the ability to combat it. They've relied heavily on the lessons and analysis of the feminist health movement. They've learned that the system can be fought, and sometimes must be.

While gays and lesbians have been forging new alliances and fighting an urgent struggle, others in the left have been shamefully absent. Progressive publications have rarely published either political coverage or safe sex and needle-use information. (Nearly a decade into the crisis, this is the first **Briarpatch** article on AIDS. I hope it won't be the last.) Unions have been



Taking over the stage in Montreal to condemn government inaction.

slow to fight for health benefits or nondiscrimination protection clauses in collective agreements, and the labour movement has been virtually silent on political AIDS issues. With few exceptions, the NDP has kept AIDS issues on the back-burner. The socialist left has been no better. There has been more attention paid lately, but it's damn little and damn late.

The AIDS crisis has forced many gays and lesbians into action. They've made many gains, but the battle against AIDS will still claim many preventable casualties unless others join the struggle immediately. Prevention campaigns are still drastically underfunded, misdirected, or absent entirely from some communities. Research is still inadequate and controlled by the wrong interests. Treatment is still mismanaged, outdated, or unavailable - with fatal consequences.

In the fight against AIDS, silence equals death. For those who have been silent so far, it's time to speak out and act up. □

Glen Brown is gay, white, middle-class and learning. He is on the steering committee of AIDS ACTION NOW! and a former Briarpatch staff member.