



Dionne Warwick and Cyndi Lauper at the Metro Boston Against AIDS fundraiser, Dec 4 '85.

Coming out in unexpected ways

"Perhaps the greatest tragedy is that Rita came down with AIDS before her dream could be realized."

By Marea Murray

It's the summer of 1985. Maya, one of the veteran buddies at Boston's AIDS Action Committee (AAC) is leaving for Europe. He has worked with Rita some two years. A notorious character, Rita is a Cuban transsexual who has withstood more bouts of PCP (pneumocystis carinii pneumonia) than anyone else to date. She needs a buddy and Peter at AAC keeps asking me. Though my stints working one-on-one with people with AIDS (PWAs) have been comparatively short, they have all been intense. My life — between volunteering at AAC, full-time social work, school, work and lover — is stretched to the limit. Yet there is no one available for Rita, and Maya is to leave shortly. I'm torn, but finally say I'll do what I can until a buddy with more time can be found.

At one of the residences for people with AIDS in Boston, Rita greets me wearing large eyeglasses, make-up, a tee-shirt and skirt. She leads me up to her room where we chat nervously about her good friend Jana and other matters while we wait for Maya. I'm not sure what to make of her nor she of me and I'm fully aware that she and Maya are very attached to each other. Later, Maya gives me a short history and the necessary details as he'll be unreachable on the road. I send Rita's mother and stepfather my contact numbers.

I'm curious about Rita's life and metamorphosis, but I'm hesitant to ask questions. I find out nothing seems to faze her. Her sex change protocol stopped when she was diagnosed. One breast was damaged and a lung punctured when they were trying to help her breathe during a PCP bout. She is mystified about how she got "it" and she tells me about being abandoned by her suburban family — a man to whom she'd been wife and his young children to whom she'd been mother. She'd rather regale me with stories of drag shows, her travels, men she's known, her life in Florida. She repeats the stories months later when Tim becomes her full-time buddy. Rita strikes me as very gay in her musical tastes and love of the nightlife, but tells me *sotto voce* she feels strange living in a house of gay men. It is an outside-ness I come to understand.

We trade stories about being hassled for who we are in the street. Sometimes, particularly when she is feeling sick or depressed, her stubble will show through. When we go to one of her favorite thrift stores — she in her skirt and me in my fatigues — she buys blouses and skirts while I purchase a book on feminist therapy. I watch the other women shoppers and passersby, anxious they'll say something hurtful to Rita, but they do not. We just get a lot of stares.

In a disconcerting way, I come up against my own sexism. Uncomfortable when she wants to engage in "girl talk," I must confront how much energy I spend distancing myself from the "ostentatiously feminine" (sic) and from women comfortable in tradi-

tional roles — even with this very non-traditional person. I'm unsure why Peter matched us, but I'm learning more than I can articulate.

Often when I visit, Rita insists we eat, making us beans and rice and sometimes meat. Once she receives a check from her mother and we go to Ground Round on her. She is happy with the meal, a Southern Comfort and Coke (or two) and we laugh. Sometimes I'm embarrassed to be with her (and feel guilty about it). At the same time, I respect her courage. Treated like a freak in and out of the hospitals since she's undergone sex change, Rita is a survivor. Perhaps the greatest tragedy is that she came down with AIDS before her dream could be realized. Still, she lives with astounding energy and gusto on her good days.

One fall day another PWA who lives with her in the newest residence comes upon us having lunch in their kitchen. Rita has been low and I've not seen her in a while. Telephone conversations with her are mostly long silences.

"Y'know, most people wouldn't do what you're doing," John says.

Unsure what he means, I look up while Rita continues munching.

"Eating with a PWA off *real* dishes."

Interviewing with a straight woman who is looking for a roommate, I nod when she tells me she has some gay friends but they are all men. Towards the end of the visit I ask her for a glass of water. She stands to reach for one in the cupboard and pauses. Back turned, she chuckles and asks "We *can* share glasses, can't we?" Caught off guard, I'm not sure whether she's posing the question because I'm gay or because of my AIDS work. The sinking feeling tells me she has already made up her mind.

I'm off to the Bay area for a vacation with my lover. The difference from a year ago is stunning. AIDS is everywhere and the Castro is comparatively deserted. One of my lover's friends has seen a letter from me in *Ms.* They've edited it down to how AIDS is affecting the struggle for gay rights, taking out any references to women with AIDS or at-risk for AIDS. I find it ominous.

My lover's mother asks me about my work when she and I are alone. It is the only time anyone has ever asked me if I might be infected from it and potentially "a carrier" in a sexual context. Numbly, I answer "No, I'm not putting your daughter at risk."

Rock Hudson's face is on both covers — *Time* and *Newsweek*. I decide to buy them to check out the coverage. Setting the magazines on the counter, I reach for my wallet.

"Oh, such a shame. He was such a handsome man," sighs the clerk. I do not say what I am thinking: Many other handsome

men died before this and few cared. The coverage leaves me mixed. Reagan actually makes a statement. A star who "happened to be gay" has died. There is a public outpouring of concern and sadness. Liz Taylor gets involved with AmFar (American Federation for AIDS Research). It is another watershed, I tell myself, America is discovering AIDS at last. A feeling of dread washes over me.

It's September of 1985 and I'm interning by a twist of fate at a Catholic hospital, one of the three free-care facilities in Boston. Given I'm the only student in the social work department and the only intern working on the oncology/renal floors, I expect to feel isolated. I see only one gay man in the mental health meetings. At least there is one. I'm also braced for other feelings. My father died in a hospital with cancer six years ago this month after suffering years and spending his last eight months bedridden at home.

A man new to my pod, or sub-group of buddies at AAC, is diagnosed. Soon Paul Cronin will be famous for successfully suing New England Telephone for breach of confidentiality and discrimination. Meanwhile, Tim and the rest of the AAC have moved to their new Boylston Street offices and will soon incorporate as a separate entity from Fenway Community Health Center. Larry Kessler, AAC's executive director, points out to me — several times — that posters for the AAC Dynasty II benefit feature two same sex couples this year. I'm surprised Larry remembers my letter to Peter about last year's all-male poster. I notice the "dykes" on the poster are in dresses, but the crowd itself is more diverse. I glimpse the lover of a PWA I was buddies with, Thom, across the hall. I'm pleased we manage to get within range of each other. We kiss in greeting and he seems in good spirits. Just as my lover and I are leaving, Rita and Jana make their entrance. Statuesque, Jana is dressed in black while Rita is in gold sequins and stilettos. I'm amazed and my lover is speechless as she's never met Rita. That's her, all right!

There is talk at school of an "Isms" committee forming to combat sexism and other kinds of discrimination. I get on it. Almost immediately a faculty member tells us how divided his health policy class is around AIDS and issues like quarantining.

"I'm a lesbian who's been a buddy to four people with AIDS. I'd be glad to speak

BATTLES JOINED ODYSSEY OF A LESBIAN AIDS ACTIVIST PART 3 OF 5

to your class." The committee looks at me. I guess it was a mouthful. I'm coming out in new ways and some of it's unexpected.

My lover and I break up in an especially wrenching way. A week later I walk into a cancer patient's room, knowing he is showing signs of CNS (damage to the Central

Nervous System), and find his wife tapping his back to loosen the fluid that inevitably gathers in his lungs. Flashing back to doing the same thing with my Dad when he was at home, bedridden, I cannot bring myself to intrude on the couple. It is only days later that I can bear the full impact of emotions that come full throttle to the surface. I come out to my supervisor, telling her how hard it is to deal with the homophobia and AIDSphobia in a Catholic hospital. She asks how I manage "all this." I have no answer.

A man with a horrible, raw-skinned face has taken me out to dinner and gets very upset with me over something trivial. That's not why I brought you here, he says, tears in his eyes. I try to understand, finding I can-



AIDS Action Committee's ARTCETERA '85 organizers (L-R): Patrick Roll, Mike Ward, Harry Collings, Bill Hodgins, Liz Page, Pam Hoyle, Michael Dowling, Peter Cassels, Bill Feldkamp, Bob Griffith, David Latham, and Larry Kessler

not speak. Suddenly I become aware the roof is leaking. Two women sit at other tables in old-fashioned dress. They are oblivious to the streams of water leaking down all around them. Startled, I shout "It's getting closer." One of the women looks up and exclaims "It is!" as if noticing the decaying process for the first time. I'm seeing how shabby this restaurant, this "treat," really is as I turn back to this man who seems to be like an open sore...

Awakening quickly, I consider the AIDS talk I'm to give and recall Charlie and his lesions, his burned swollen face and the woman in the driveway blocking the path of a cab coming to get him. And I cry.

It's not the first AIDS dream by any means, but my denial and resistance are at low ebb.

Looking over the chart of a patient I'm supposed to see at the hospital, I hear a nurse come slamming out of a room mumbling audibly about AIDS and "no one giving a damn about us." "These people shouldn't be here," she says to another nurse, referring to the bloodied, suspected IV-drug using and homeless man they are trying to discharge by 5 p.m. I feel a shudder and go to find my supervisor. She tells me to see the Director. Then I hear the inpatient psych unit has a gay man they think has AIDS. The shit is hitting the fan.

I suggest a talk on psychosocial issues and AIDS for staff and volunteer myself and someone from AAC. An LICSW, Leo will probably carry more weight with them. I make the arrangements, wondering who will show. It's all I can do. I tell myself I am doing too much as it is; and, to my supervisor I say it's not up to me to educate the hospital staff.

Meanwhile, Rita has gone back into Mass. General. Tim tells me she's depressed and talking about this being it. When I reach her, she doesn't even give me hell for not calling in a while. (She never calls me.) I decide to make a day of it when Leo and I do our presentation on a Friday in early December. Only two people from the psych unit show and, as for our department, the Director and her assistant are missing.

I ride the T to see Rita in my suit. The gesture isn't lost on her as she compliments me on my threads. We talk quietly and watch some television until she asks for the urinal and I offer to leave.

David Aronstein, LICSW, the newest member of the AAC staff, is to meet me in the Student Union room where we'll be addressing health workers, faculty and "the
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Simon calls for more funding and education for AIDS.

Candidates

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didates are dealing with Afghanistan, racism, or AIDS," said Petrelis. The protest was an attempt to inject an important issue into the campaign, he said. Gorman said that ACT NOW (AIDS Coalition To Network, Organize and Wed) — a National coalition of AIDS organizations in San Francisco — is planning a series of demonstrations in the spring in an attempt to draw further attention to AIDS during the presidential campaign.

Although few ACT UP or MASS ACT OUT members gave favorable ratings on AIDS issues to any of the Democratic candidates except Jesse Jackson, they said the Republican candidates have been even worse. Every Republican candidate supports mandatory HIV testing for some groups, and contact tracing of sexual partners of people with AIDS (PWAs). They also favor quarantine for PWAs who engage in high risk behavior. None of the GOP candidates support increases in the current funding levels for AIDS education, treatment and research. All support the Helms amendment to the federal health care appropriations bill, which bans federal funding for AIDS education that "promotes homosexuality." Most of the candidates have skirted the AIDS issue as much as possible, mentioning the "A word" only when asked a direct question, said Petrelis.

Vice-President Bush recently said in a debate that the "worst thing about AIDS," is the shame families feel when their son dies of AIDS. Pat Robertson has repeatedly stated that AIDS can be contracted through casual contact and that AIDS is God's punishment for immoral behavior. Former Delaware Gov. Pete du Pont has said nothing about AIDS except that "monogamy and abstinence" are the only ways to stop the spread of the disease. According to Jeff Levi, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, only Senator Robert Dole has put any thought into the issue.

Before the rally at the debate site, Petrelis and Reed unveiled an AIDS quilt in Manchester's Veterans Memorial Park. The quilt commemorated 50 residents of Bailey House who have died of AIDS — nearly one every week — since the house was founded in 1986. Petrelis and Reed said the quilt, which was visible to hundreds of supporters of Illinois Sen. Paul Simon, former Arizona Gov. Bruce Babbitt, and Missouri Rep. Richard Gephardt, was another attempt to draw attention to the personal tragedy of the epidemic. Every presidential candidate was invited to speak at the gathering, but only Simon, followed by a large press and security contingent, showed up to shake hands with several PWAs. He also called for increased funding for research, education and treatment, directed especially toward IV drug users. Simon, who voted for the anti-gay Helms amendment, said in front of an NBC News camera, "Mike (Petrelis) and James (Reed) will not be around much longer if we don't do something. We need a government that moves to help those less fortunate in society and does not bend to the rich and powerful." Simon added that when several PWAs testified before a Senate

committee he chaired, friends from Illinois warned him about contracting the disease. "This is an example of the kind of ignorance and bigotry that can come even from well-meaning people, that AIDS victims face."

Jackson sent openly gay Boston City Councilor David Scondras to speak on his behalf. Scondras said he was not there to campaign for Jackson and then proceeded to give him a ringing endorsement. "I am not here to push for Jackson. We [gay men and lesbians] have an opportunity to help ourselves. I want us to be in a situation where whoever gets nominated has our agenda." Scondras said that even if Jackson does not win enough delegates himself to get the nomination, he will have enough delegates to influence the nomination.

Reed listed the names of Bailey House residents, many of whom were Black and Latino, who died of AIDS. He said "I want to know what each candidate is doing to prevent our names from being added to the list."

Many people wandered around the snow covered park to look at the quilt. An NBC camera man straddled a quilt panel to get a closer shot at Simon until he was asked to move by an ACT UP member. A huge Silence = Death banner served as a backdrop to the quilt. Petrelis said two months ago he would not have dreamed a mainstream candidate would show up and shake hands with "AIDS victims."

Reed said Bailey House, funded by the city and state of New York, is very important for homeless PWAs. He explained many more such houses are needed because the homeless are the fastest growing group of PWAs. "But it is a very hard place to live. You get close to everyone. When people die part of you dies with them," said Reed. □

Stroh's

Continued from page 1

could endanger the beer's macho image in some way. Obviously," he said, "other beer companies which advertize weekly in all three of our local gay and lesbian papers have not found this to be the case."

Stroh Corporation is still contemplating future support of the Gay and Lesbian Press Association, according to Johnston. The brewery produces Stroh's, Stroh's Light and Signature beers. □

Unexpected

Continued from page 7

public" on AIDS. I know he's been on the Mental Health subcommittee at AAC but we haven't met. By phone we agreed he'd do the bulk of the presentation and I'd help answer questions. People gather in a semi-circle and we start off.

"Well, I see social work is still a women's profession," he says with a smirk. Several annoyed classmates look at me. I feel like hissing and shift uncomfortably. Just as he says something to the effect that no men are here and that's no surprise, a tall obviously gay man walks in. Now it's our turn to smile.

"Are all the buddies at AAC gay?" a friend asks me. I say the Committee work was part of the coming out process for many of us. I realize that like younger gay men, I too have come out in the age of AIDS.

My family loves me but they don't understand why I'm queer. After initial upset over my doing cancer-related hospice work, they surprise me by raising no objections when I go on to be an AIDS buddy. But on a visit at Christmas time I'm painfully reminded of our differences.

"What do you call Rambo with AIDS?" my brother asks, promising it's "a great joke." I tell him I don't want to hear it, that I've no sense of humor around AIDS given all the suffering and losses I've seen.

"Rambutt!" He explodes in laughter at the punchline.

I look at my 22-year-old brother who's been cruised in the Village and Dupont Circle, knowing why he's insisted on this confrontation. And I weigh the options.

Snapping "That's homophobic," I leave it at that. Turning on my heel, I walk away with the familiar despair slamming into my chest.

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