

Friction between the factions

Activist strategies clash amid the pain of loss and grief

By Marea Murray

I've decided not to go to my family's, near Washington, D.C., for Christmas. Last year was a nightmare and I returned to find my apartment robbed. Thus, the only difficult part of this decision is that it is vigorously protested by my mother. Jim, who, like me, is a buddy to people with AIDS, invites me to join him and his lover Michael and "gay family" for Christmas dinner. Increasingly the Boston AIDS Action Committee is like family to me, especially the Support Services team or group of volunteer buddies to PWAs (we've stopped calling ourselves the "hospice group" because we want to emphasize the living part of having AIDS. There are about ten of us for the holiday. We exchange gifts and I am touched by Jim's gay-ly colored and hand-sewn napkins. It's cold and crisp when Paul-David and I say goodnight.

Peter, from the Committee calls me about Charlie, a gay man with AIDS who is asking for a buddy during the day. In school and working, I'm only free one afternoon a week and besides...what did he say about a woman? Peter says he was pleased, had said "Oh good, we can talk about pretty things, like flowers, not just *this*." I know little about flowers but keep my smile to myself.

Charlie has Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) and has had a lot of radiation for the lesions on his face, so I must be prepared. Finding the back door in the South End, I knock. It opens slowly. A man with glasses and discolored skin faces me. He's not as disfigured as I'd anticipated and I purposefully look back as neutrally as I can. The first impression is crucial.

We talk for two hours. He tells me how he was treated in the military when he fell ill; how they hospitalized him for six weeks for "observation" until he got some help from a Congressman so he could be with Thom, his lover; how they tried "every which way" to get him to "admit to homosexuality" so they could discharge him without medical benefits. We talk about the soaps, how bored he is, his dream to go on *60 Minutes* before it's too late to tell his story. His outrage is tempered. He tells me things in a calm, quiet voice, almost gently.

Matter-of-factly, I ask about his radiation. When I ask if he gets out I'm astonished because, unlike some of the other men with Kaposi's, he and his roommates go out often to dine and choose different restaurants to try. He is brave, even fearless in this, rather than withdrawn because of the loss of his body in such an apparent way. Charlie's family of friends is remarkable because they will not only be seen with him but carry on as normally as possible. It's said one discovers who one's friends are in times of illness, and indeed Charlie's friends stand by him resolutely.

His lover, Thom, knows Gail, who works at the Committee offices, Jason and Bob, the other roommates, are a couple. From them, I glean a bit about Charlie "before." I don't recognize the hunky man in a photo Thom shows me one day. The pain in his eyes mirrors my surprise when he tells me it's Charlie, a year ago.

One afternoon Charlie tells me about the day he and Thom were going to the hospital and a woman was blocking the driveway in her car. The cab couldn't come down the alleyway to pick him up. Very weak, he was also incensed.

"Oh, it's probably just another faggot with AIDS." That's what she said to me, fucking bitch." There are tears in his eyes and fear crosses his ravaged face.

"You know what scares me the most?" he asks, turning toward me, "that I'll need an ambulance someday and it won't be able to get through."

I meet Tim on a blind date — not what you think. He wasn't wild about Paul-David and I wasn't wild about P-D's friend. But Tim and I enjoy each other. We laugh when

waitresses give him the eye and discuss whether to cut tips when he is given the check. It's very odd after all this time to be taken for a couple, but we play it for all it's worth and hit all the gayest night spots.

Charlie has been hospitalized. I walk over to MGH and go to the floor Thom has told me is so welcoming to his lover. I tell the nurse on duty who I'm there to see. She looks shocked but says nothing (I imagine it's because I'm an obvious lesbian) and tells me his room number.

I'm completely unprepared. Charlie is seated in a wheelchair, his head face down on the tray, food and liquid strewn all over the floor and nearby counter. He appears to be unconscious. His feet and hands are swollen far beyond normal size. Horrified, I say his name softly. He doesn't stir. I leave, walking briskly, shaken and somehow embarrassed for him, in his vulnerability, and for myself for not being ready. As if I could have been.

Later I'm told he'd "lost it" — must've just before I got there. The doctors fear it's due to CNS (Central Nervous System) damage or lesions on his brain. If so, the end is probably near.

He dies shortly after. I arrive while he is in ICU. Thom comes out with the news. I meet Bruce and Steve, close friends I'd heard about, Charlie's brother and, very briefly, his mother. Thom is very good with her given how homophobic she is. She isn't sure what to make of me, doesn't shake my hand, a woman working with faggots.

Finally, Charlie's mother takes him down South, has him buried in a uniform, wants his jewelry, the VCR. Thom shows me the watch and rings he's saved.

I've been on vacation and Thom's trying to reach me. I receive a beautiful pink envelope, not unlike a wedding invitation. But this is an invitation to a celebration — of Charlie's life with reception to follow. The



tribute is beautiful and so very gay. We each have a lavender balloon tied to our chairs. "Amazing Grace" always moves me to tears. AIDS is mentioned often and referred to in impassioned and humorous eulogies delivered by Charlie's gay and lesbian friends. Afterwards, we take our balloons and let them go into the sky above Newbury Street. Passersby stop and watch them ascend. It is hard not to break down again.

Exhausted, I make my way to a belated birthday dinner party thrown for me by a woman I like very much. Tim introduced us recently. We go to the bar to dance it off, she invites me home with her, and we open our arms to each other.

I don't remember the specifics — date or year...just that the air was brisk and I entered alone. We're at Waterman's the funeral home in Kenmore Square which will take PWAs when many do not. It is an open casket. Men and women are holding each other, sobbing. My friend Laurel is there, pale and drawn. I haven't seen her in many months.

A man ahead of me in the viewing line gasps and begins to weep when he views the body. Breathing deeply, I step forward. Kevin, one of the first buddies in Boston lies

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Mythology

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have children, Bowen asked, "Now that you have your babies, has it become too difficult to fight the good fight?"

Bowen also discussed the hope she has gained from the second wave of feminism, begun two decades ago. Her own commitment to maintaining that hope includes being an out, proud lesbian around her youngest child, a fourteen-year-old girl. Bowen also spoke of the strength and hope she finds in teaching her daughter to rely not just on a mother, but on a community: "No one person should try to be the be-all to another person. We must surround our children with people they can count on."

Returning to the opening theme of her disillusionment with the myth of motherhood, Bowen concluded that if she had it all to do over again, she would choose not to be a primary or biological parent, but to help raise the children of friends and community members. She lamented "the trips I haven't taken, the books I haven't read, the books I haven't written, the women I haven't loved." □

A day's work

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regardless of the DSS homophobia, the women could not find a solution to subtler forms of abuse. One woman asked, almost rhetorically, "What do I do when I see a lesbian couple teaching their children racism and raising children with no self-esteem. Is there some sort of safety net our community can create?"

Race and Class

Although these issues emerged throughout the day, one of the conference panels was devoted to the topic of race and class, opened by moderator Joyce Kauffman's comment, "I always hear upper-middle-class people talk about deserving what they have because they worked hard for it. It occurs to me that poor and working class people work very hard for what they don't have."

The first panelist to speak, Julia Perez reminded the audience that for many women of color, race is a more important factor than sexual identity, since "the world sees my race first and my queerness second or not at all." The biological and adoptive mother of four children of different races, Perez told stories of people treating her Black and Latino children differently than her white children, especially in sexualizing the kids of color: "For example, my seven-year-old daughter's teacher said to me, 'some man is going to do something to her with that sensuous walk of hers.'"

Perez addressed the issue of lesbians adopting children from other countries. She talked angrily of friends who adopted foreign — especially Third World — children without an accompanying interest in the child's native culture. She also told of an Asian child who was repeatedly returned to an institution because he couldn't learn English quickly enough.

Andrea Rogers, a white working class woman, focused her speech on class ignorance in the feminist community. She told of breaking her leg while employed at the Women's Center in Cambridge, and travelling to work every day by public transportation. She was shocked to hear a middle-class community member praise her actions as dedication. Furious at the memory, Rogers told the audience, "I went to my job because I had no sick leave. When you miss a day's pay, your children don't eat."

Susan Moir, a panelist who described herself as a working-class recovering lesbian mother of a nineteen-year-old boy, scoffed at the now-familiar phrase "lesbians choosing children": "Choosing children? 'Children in our Lives?' That's like saying 'Clothes in our Lives' or 'Food in our Lives.'" She added, "Many of us were knocked up and had no choice."

Audience applause regularly interrupted many of the speaker's stories, especially Moir's tale of "choosing trouble, oops, I mean choosing children." Her main message was the need for more class discussion in the lesbian community, including more discussion of male children. A school bus driver and union activist who raised a son alone, Moir stated, "Don't think that because my kid had a dick, he had privilege."

The final panelist was a Black single mother, Roberta Wilmore, who talked of facing racism from whites and hostile at-

titudes from both Blacks and whites who claimed she was selling out by sending her son to private school. One Black lesbian in the audience spoke up in support of Wilmore, asserting, "For people of color, education is a weapon to survive, not a way to have control over others."

Like many others throughout the day who expressed skepticism of the notion of choice, Wilmore explained that in order to support her son and provide for her aging parents, she felt forced to "choose" a corporate job, a decision easy for more privileged people to condemn.

Moir closed the panel's question and answer period with two demands of future conferences. The first addressed the anger of all panelists at the low turnout for the session. While hundreds of women came to the previous panel, "Considering Motherhood," the race and class session began with an audience of 30, which grew to about 80. Noting that participants had to choose between the panel and workshops and caucuses, Moir insisted the next race and class discussion occur alone.

Addressing the inclusion of an upper-middle-class as well as a working-class mother's gathering at the conference, Moir said, "There should be no caucuses for privileged women unless they are specifically to address class issues."

Organizers of the conference invite interested women to come evaluate the gathering and consider planning future events. The meeting will take place Thursday, March 3, at the Women's Center in Cambridge. Call 617-354-8807 for more information. □

Friction

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calmly, very thin in the casket. I think of his face angrily making a point at a meeting or happily hosting his Christmas party. I flash to my father's wake and the "well-meaning" people who whispered about how awful he looked as I stood by watching, wanting to scream "What did you expect?" Kevin doesn't look so bad. But he is twenty-eight years old. Touching his hand, I tell him good-bye. And I think about Laurel, who spent so much time with him when he wasn't travelling to places he always wanted to see. Then I walk away without seeing, tears pushing their way out of my eyes, noiselessly running down my face.

It is February and our pod, or sub-group of Committee buddies, meets at Richard's apartment in the Fenway. We not only have a reporter with us tonight who will write about "AIDS hospice workers" for the Boston *Globe*, but we will be viewing the NOVA program on AIDS which includes Kevin. I'm apprehensive given media coverage thus far and the intimate nature of pod meetings. But the program is well done and Anita Diamant is unobtrusive. We are subdued; it's another heavy evening. Anita offers my friend Katie and I a ride to Harvard Square. It's likely she'll feature Katie and her work with Haitian kids and I'm a little jealous.

At a spotlight she asks us: "Why do you do this work?" Neither of us points out the obvious. I say for political reasons and recount my hospice experience. Katie says she was concerned about homophobia. We don't say we're lesbians and she doesn't ask. When Katie is featured she is the only woman. All the men are identified as gay men.

It's the spring of '85 and I've been quiet at the lesbian brunch. "the Subject" comes up. A woman says she's getting worried because the Boston *Globe* says AIDS is hitting the general population. I feel the rage start up my spine but decide I don't have the energy to ask her which population she considers herself a part of anyway. Or wax philosophical along the lines of "First they came for the Communists, then the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't...." Instead I watch the scene as if behind a telescopic camera, as far removed as I feel. Several of the women who know I'm involved with the AIDS Action Committee (AAC) are looking at me expectantly.

"It's been hitting the general population," I finally say, biting each word off as I tick off the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) "high risk groups" — gay/bisexual men. IV drug users, Haitians (who will soon be removed from the list),

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Friction

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blood transfusion and factor 8 recipients before March 1985, and their partners. Everyone looks bewildered. They just don't get it.

My lover and I are arguing about time. Specifically how much time I'm devoting to AIDS Action. I've been a co-convenor of my pod with Leo since February and I have more meetings to go to, but I'm not currently a buddy and ours is a new relationship. I'm trying not to take her accusations to heart. That is, until she says it.

"You're more gay-identified than woman-identified."

I feel as if I've been punched in the stomach.

The Boston *Globe* goes on record in favor of placing foster children in "normal households," i.e. heterosexual, dual parent, mother-at-home. The Mass. Governor, Michael Dukakis, institutes his foster care policy making it virtually impossible for gay, lesbian and single people to be foster parents. I see Jason Schneider, AAC's Steering Chair, John, Katie and a few others from AAC at the rallies. I wonder where the other men I know are...particularly with AIDS insinuated into this and the gay rights debates that spring of 1985.

I've been writing to *Sojourner* and *MS* about the lack of AIDS coverage in the women's press, a huge lack despite the number of lesbians and other working class women within AIDS organizations facing sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia and despite the increasing number of women at risk and infected. *Soj* prints a letter and the request for women volunteers I slip in at the end. Peter is averse to "advertising" for buddies because motivation to apply is important. But I know from interviewing applicants that women, Creole and Spanish speakers and people of color are not volunteering. Their services are needed; the Support Services Team of buddies (SST) is almost entirely white and gay and male. Few of us are bilingual.

Many women I know are affiliated with the Gay and Lesbian Defense Committee (GLDC) formed out of the foster care travesty. It's ironic so many women protest about the removal of two boys from a gay male couple. But judging from the response I see, many gay men feel more personally threatened by AIDS and the catastrophic losses it entails than by homophobic policies forged by the politicians who also vote on AIDS spending. They don't seem to grasp the connections many lesbians see. Certainly, as women, we don't have the privileges men — even gay men — are accorded. It is a painful argument. Add to it that gay rights and "the homosexual lifestyle" are debated in an almost exclusively male context and, once again, the lesbian are invisible but affected. If AIDS is used to defeat human rights legislation, or to deny foster care consideration, then lesbians and gay men both lose out.

Interviewing volunteers for SST, I meet men who have not even been out as gay men, let alone politically active. AIDS has mobilized, even radicalized, many of them but it is often a narrow agenda. It is very difficult to ask about sexism and racism. Class oppression (which could be said to underscore it all) is ignored. I shake my head often as the year moves along. Sliding scale or low income tickets are not made available for AAC events; wheelchair accessibility is "solved" with an elevator; child care is not even discussed. Becoming more cynical, I re-draft a lengthy analysis, "AIDS and Isms," and send it off to *Radical America* and *off our backs* in hopes the progressives and feminists will address the subject.

In June of 1985 I march for Pride again with The Committee, so much larger now it is outgrowing the Fenway office. Linnette Liebling, the Health Educator, Ken Smith, director of the hot-line, and my friend Tim have been hired on. There are many more signs marking the number of deaths this year and new faces outside SST I don't recognize. There is some grumbling that the signs are too depressing and that AIDS is equated with gayness in the press. Indeed, it is and photos the next day in the paper are of AAC. We are loud and proud this year — stopping at the State House to chant "More funding for AIDS." State monies for research have been cut and the announced priority is for a "more accurate test for the virus." The Massachusetts FY86 budget

allocates \$1.83 million for AIDS medical and support services.

Fall brings with it more foster care demonstrations. Larry Kessler, AAC's Executive Director, is asked repeatedly to speak out. AAC relies on the state for some 40 percent of its budget. The line is that AAC cannot afford to alienate the Governor and other powerful governmental funding sources just beginning to consider AIDS more than a problem for promiscuous homosexuals and addicted inner city (i.e. minority) types. In October, *An Early Frost* is the first network television movie to "deal with AIDS." It depicts a white upper middle class gay man, who has no community, in a rather sanitized way. He and his lover barely touch, but it is hailed as a landmark in American media imagery.

Increasingly there is frustration over the AAC's role in the gay community and the need to appeal to broader constituencies. Larry stresses that AAC is committed to people with AIDS and ARC regardless of orientation. He and others argue that, if AAC were to take up the foster care or gay rights causes, many of the very people who need educating or services would be irreversibly alienated from AIDS Action and tenuous governmental liaisons would be permanently cut off. "AAC," it is said, "is not a gay organization."

Others counter that AAC grew out of the gay and lesbian community, is comprised of gay, lesbian and women volunteers and that the fight against AIDS is linked to civil rights and protection from discrimination. Kessler is no neophyte. Active in the civil rights movement during the 'sixties, an active member with the Catholic Worker and organizer of Project BRead, he cuts a wide swath in political circles. But his interpretations and strategy leave some of us puzzled and ambivalent when the battles begin to be waged between the AAC and GLDC, the foster care policy activists.

The newly re-elected Dukakis hosts the ARTScetera auction, a major AAC fundraiser and a black tie affair. GLDC pickets. Both sides are vehement. There is debate within AAC and the Steering Committee apparently decides not to issue a statement. Kessler tries to divorce The Committee from GLDC. Angered by GLDC's inclusion of increased AIDS funding in a list of demands, he fears state funding will be jeopardized and all AAC has worked for will be endangered. The schism is widened.

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Army

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yet comment on the decision. Previous court rulings, including a 1980 decision by Anthony Kennedy who was recently confirmed to the U.S. Supreme Court, have upheld military regulations on the grounds that "homosexuality is incompatible with military service." In the Feb. 10 ruling, dissenting Judge Stephen Reinhardt cited the 1986 Supreme Court *Hardwick* decision upholding Georgia's sodomy law. Because gay men and lesbians can be punished criminally for sexual conduct, Reinhardt argued they are not entitled to constitutional protection.

However, prevailing Judges William A. Norris and William C. Canby, Jr. emphasized that military regulations prohibit "homosexual orientation" as well as "homosexual acts." Therefore, since Watkins was never proven to engage in gay sex, his case was not covered by the *Hardwick* decision. In the 60-page opinion, Norris wrote, "Laws that limit the acceptable focus of one's sexual desires to members of the opposite sex, like laws that limit one's choice of sexual partner to members of the same race, cannot withstand constitutional scrutiny."

filed from Boston

Crackdown

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sexual minorities is to push the sexual revolution forward, not backwards. "AIDS, like sex, is a way of controlling horny kids and driving gay kids back into the closet," he said.

Barry Lynn, legislative council for the American Civil Liberties Union, said censors often lack the ability to distinguish between educational and pornographic material. "The Meese Commission lumped everything violent together. Almost every non-mainstream sexual act is suspect and characterized as violent," said Lynn. He said the landmark Supreme Court pornography decision *Miller v. Ca.*, which set

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