A Play In the Life

Andrew Vélez travels back in time with an old friend

February 1, 2001 By Andrew Velez

The weathered, century-old red stone building at the windswept foot of Jane Street in New York City's historic Greenwich Village once housed the survivors of the *Titanic* and later earned a steamy reputation as a seedy hotel for sailors. Its own twists and turns make an appropriate setting for the apocalyptic moments of millennial life; its current incarnation houses an unrehearsed and unscripted theater production called *Lifegame* that brings the journeys of different people to the stage.

On a Saturday afternoon when the lights went up, HIVer and longtime activist Peter Staley took his turn as the day's subject. The press release bills the experience as "an extraordinary show from ordinary lives." The first half is right-on, but ordinary has never been an accurate word to describe Staley.

I met Peter Staley 13 years ago. Yet one of the many remarkable things about life in the epidemic is that often we work, struggle, fight with -- sometimes against -- one another, sharing illnesses and deaths, while knowing very little about one another's real lives. In the ACT UP trenches, there was a closeness even with those you might not otherwise like.

Looking fine today in a black t-shirt and jeans, Peter took a seat next to the interviewer, who guided us through his life as one of the half-dozen actors took turns portraying him in improvised scenes. We saw the then-chubby Peter, scion of an affluent WASP family, building a fort in the woods with his best pal. Later staring down a school bully. A typical Staley family dinner -- viewed by his now-divorced parents sitting in the audience. There was Peter's initiation into gay life, under the knowing tutelage of a London porn shopkeeper, who introduced him to the wonders of a discotheque. A scene of memorably ardent collegiate lovemaking and doping from his Oberlin days prompted Peter to compliment the actor playing him on his "good kissing."

Then, November 1985. An accomplished 25-year-old Wall Street bond dealer, Peter received a phone call on the floor of the Stock Exchange and learned that he was HIV positive. Telling his family about his status also meant coming out to them from a deeply closeted life. But even his politically conservative father was unhesitatingly supportive.

Peter was later involved in some daring assaults upon the offices of drug companies and government officials, and soon became a familiar "face of AIDS" in the media. Part of a small band

who fitted a giant condom over Jesse Helms' house, Peter later cofounded the Treatment Action Group (TAG).

I've spent so long thinking that I knew everything about this privileged young man who became a warrior. I had been there (nearly 12 years ago) when a reporter asked, "Do you expect to live to see the end of AIDS?" Peter said no, without hesitating. For me, instantly and forever, the starkness of the plague became real. Near the end of *Lifegame*, I heard the rest of the story. The interviewer asked him what he wants these days. Staley smiled: "Just to keep enjoying life."

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