The Artist

May 1, 2012 By Jennifer Morton

When Avram Finkelstein decided to organize a small group of friends to talk about issues relating to HIV after his boyfriend died of AIDS, he never imagined it would lead to the creation of the most iconic slogan of the AIDS movement. The group came together starting in 1985 to discuss their fears and grief, but the conversations often turned to politics. People were dying, and the government wasn't doing enough about it. To express their outrage, the group decided to create a series of political posters. The first design took them nearly a year. They scrutinized every aspect of the poster for optimal impact—from the exact color of the fuchsia triangle to the font choice (Gill Sans Bold Extra Condensed) to the words "Silence=Death."

The Silence=Death Project (as the group called themselves) began wheat pasting their poster around New York City in February 1987. A few weeks later at the LGBT Community Center, legendary AIDS activist Larry Kramer gave a pivotal speech that gave birth to the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP. The group began holding regular weekly meetings at the Center. At one meeting, someone mentioned seeing the striking posters around the city, and the two groups connected. It was soon decided that "Silence=Death" would become ACT UP's official slogan. The rest is AIDS history.

Finkelstein grew up in New York City and was raised by leftist parents who encouraged him as an artist. He protested the Vietnam War and became involved in the Student Mobilization Committee. Around the same time, he became interested in the Social Realism movement. The idea of using imagery and language to portray injustice was appealing to the young designer. He learned he could use his art for a purpose.

Finkelstein joined ACT UP and later became a member of Gran Fury, the artist collective that used their creative designs to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and put their own brand of political pressure on the government. The group created a series of awareness campaigns including "Kissing Doesn't Kill" and "You've Got Blood on Your Hands…" that ended up on bus stops, T-shirts and posters. Though Gran Fury disbanded in 1994, HIV-negative Finkelstein never stopped fighting. He continues to advocate on behalf of those living with the virus, and he still believes in the power of using art to inspire activism.

Twenty-five years ago, "Silence=Death" and ACT UP were created. Today, people are still dying, and the world is still not doing enough about it. Silence still equals death. So when it came time for POZ to create an image for this month's cover and the launch of the POZ Army on pozarmy.com, we were thrilled when Finkelstein agreed to lend his talents to the cause. By once again using art

to highlight injustice, we hope to inspire a new generation to act up and fight back.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Avram-Finkelstein-HIV-22361-2891