Boys' Night Out

Ever since Kramer and company got together to do something about the gay men's health crisis, the fighting hasn't stopped.

January 1, 2000 By Greg Lugliani

In the annals of AIDS, the event is as historic as Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church. But the six gay men who came together in Larry Kramer's Greenwich Village apartment on the cold, rainy night of January 12, 1982, were in a hurry. They had no idea that this meeting—to formalize an ad hoc group (that had first gathered in August 1981) by choosing a name and a mission—would help shape a nation's approach to death, disease and discrimination for the next two decades. All Paul Popham, Nathan Fain, Edmund White, Paul Rapoport, Lawrence Mass and Kramer knew was that their friends—and maybe they themselves—were dying from "the gay cancer," and few were doing anything about it.

Kramer recalls choosing the cast carefully: Mass, a doctor who'd been the first to cover the outbreak, in *The New York Native*; Fain, in Kramer's words, a "very intense and smart" journalist; Rapoport "because he was rich"; White, the author, "because he was well-known and had a little class or something"; and Popham, the handsome, closeted Wall Street exec and former Green Beret, because he was too charismatic not to be. The dark décor of Kramer's apartment mirrored the mood of the men. "Paul Rapoport said, 'Gay men certainly do have a health crisis,'" Kramer tells me. "'That's it!' I said. 'That's our name— Gay Men's Health Crisis!'" Item two on the agenda was to chrystallize a mission: raise money for research, arm gay men with what little information there was and pierce the denial that pervaded the community. That night the country's flagship AIDS service, education and advocacy organization was christened. A few months later, golden boy Popham was elected president.

It was tough going. Their first fundraiser, an April benefit dance called "Showers," was turned down by Flamingo, the hot gay disco, and held instead at the Paradise Garage, a less popular club with a primarily black clientele. Immediately afterward, the GMHC AIDS hotline, the world's first, opened on a volunteer's personal answering service. Some 100 terrified calls overwhelmed it on the first day—a number that, like the body count, only kept rising.

With the calls came the criticism. "That's when the shit started," says Kramer. According to him, those who hadn't recognized the emergency suddenly felt shut out, "though we tried to get them interested." Other complaints would dog GMHC to this day. "We were accused of being too white and too rich," Kramer says. "The usual. There were no lesbians or people of color. We tried to get

them—they wouldn't come. Popham and I would go to black groups and literally beg them. Forget it. After a while, we were doing such a good job that people shut up. Also, I became very adept at telling the critics to fuck themselves: Join us or get lost. Shaming them by asking, 'What the fuck are you doing to help save your brothers?' GMHC was an upper-middle-class white place for a long time, and there wasn't anything we could do about it."

GMHC eventually grew into an institution that, at its zenith, wielded an annual budget of $30 million and deployed a paid staff of 300 and a volunteer corps of 8,000 to serve some 10,000 men, women and children with HIV. As former communications director, I, too, became familiar with these charges: "GMHC doesn't serve enough people." "GMHC serves the wrong kind of people." "Why does GMHC hold the Morning Party?" "Why isn't GMHC holding the Morning Party?" And my favorite: "Why doesn't GMHC change its name?" In fact, Kramer's name for the group has lived on, though his own criticism of GMHC—that it was too timid politically—precipitated his dramatic resignation in April 1983.

Of the six men who met in Kramer's apartment, half have since died of AIDS. Mass, White and Kramer continue to stir the pot (only Mass is HIV negative). As someone who's twice left GMHC, I wonder whether Kramer, if asked, would return. "Would I come back now? Probably not," he says. "The place is too bent out of shape for help of the kind I can provide." While his view of GMHC's future may be grim—"I'm not sure I want it to continue; certainly not as it is"—his remembrance of things past is palpably proud. "The early years were very, very moving," he says, "in a way that I don't think anyone understands. Because we were all friends."
