Dressed for Arrest

The day the suits seized the street

May 1, 1997 By Jane Rosett

The first day of June 1987 in Washington, DC was a complete media circus. The Third International Conference on AIDS kicked off with more than 6,000 researchers--twice as many as the previous year. There was Vice President George Bush ("AIDS has the president's full attention!"), a three-month-old ACT UP ("Murderer!") and novel scenes of activists clashing with officials. The day before, a *Newsday* op-ed by Larry Kramer used the word *genocide* for the first time in print to define the Reagan administration's response to the epidemic. At the AmFAR benefit that evening, President Reagan uttered the word *AIDS* in public for the first time, the audience booed his speech calling for mandatory testing, and AmFAR diamond-mine Elizabeth Taylor tucked a fat check for AIDS research deep into her cleavage. By June 1, the official American death toll from AIDS was 20,798, and at high noon, grief, rage and despair drove 64 lesbians, gay men and others to seize the street in front of the White House.

But this was no ordinary civil disobedience (CD). The participants were a veritable *Who's Who* of AIDS activism, including founders, executive directors, board presidents and other top brass whom the organizers--the National Gay Rights Advocates, Access Now for Gay and Lesbian Equality and later the Human Rights Campaign Fund--culled from their Rolodexes. Dressed in official drag, the men in suits and ties, the women in suits and ties (and a few skirts) crossed the police barricades and sat down carefully on carpet samples to cushion their butts against the hot Pennsylvania Avenue asphalt.

The girls and boys in blue handled the arrestees wearing bright yellow Playtex kitchen gloves. This primary-color fest was a photographer's wet dream, especially when shot in Kodachrome. "Your gloves don't match your shoes!" the crowd chanted. "They'll see it on the news!" The 64 were arrested, handcuffed, jailed and released at $50 a head, in time for the New Yorkers to make the 6 pm shuttle home.

AIDS was the beat of the week for the press worldwide. The U.S. Senate voted 96 to 0 to support a Reagan proposal to exclude immigrants who test positive or refuse to be tested. The president's "spiritual adviser," Pat Robertson, preached about quarantining "AIDS victims," Barbara Bush held her first "AIDS baby," and ACT UP mounted its conference mantra, "Nancy Reagan, hey, hey, when ya gonna hug a PWA?"

It was a time in AIDS activism when the suits hit the streets. As ACT UP aged, some of the “CD 64,” as they called themselves, used these same tactics against others of the 64, in an attempt to hold our own accountable. While fighting against our enemies and among ourselves consumed our lives, more and more of the CD 64 died, including Dan Bradley, Leonard Matlovich, Ralph Payne, Richard Rector, Michael Hirsch, Randy Close, Don Schmidt, Victor Phillips-Way, Nathan Kolodner, Michael Callen and, most recently, Duke Comegys, who died in February. Ten years later, a few of those who sat down in the street outside the White House are now invited to a place at the table inside the White House. We still don’t know which seat is most effective in ending AIDS.

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