Heart to HAART

How to find love in an epidemic

February 1, 1999 By Kevin O'Leary

Boy Meets, Loses, and Gets Boy
Larry Kramer and David Webster

David Webster wants you to know that Larry Kramer isn't raging as much anymore. At 62, the man who ass-kicked a generation to act up now prefers to sit back and work on his new novel, *The American People.* "The volcano is sleeping," the 51-year-old architect says. And Webster is happy snuggling up next to him in the Connecticut home he built for them.

They took the road less traveled to get there. *Faggots,* Kramer's 1978 novel depicting a four-day odyssey of gay life in 1970s New York, could be construed -- depending on whether you ask the author (a.k.a. Fred Lemish, the protagonist) or Webster (Dinky, the love interest and antagonist) -- as autobiography or fiction.

"I threw out my first draft when I met David," Kramer says. Their roller-coaster romance broke his heart but gave him a plot.

"I was surprised that something from my waste-paper basket ended up in print," Webster says. "But a lot of the book was made up anyway."

"It was all true!" Kramer insists. In any case, the novel was inspired by their tumultuous relationship -- and was the final nail in its coffin.

But for these two, it's all in how you look at it. In addition to having presented Dinky warts, whips and all, the author cast a critical eye on the excesses of the time, something Webster now chalks up to Kramer's coming to the party too late. "He was in England during the '60s. He missed taking acid and watching the sunset and rolling in the dunes on Fire Island. I liked the Tenth Floor and The Flamingo. I was doing all the things he wrote about. He wasn't."

After the initial breakup, the two didn't see each other for 15 years. "I thought maybe Larry was right in *Faggots* -- that I was selfish in love and wanted sex my way. So I settled down with my business partner, Michael Eriksson." The relationship lasted until Eriksson's death from AIDS in early 1993. A few months earlier, Webster had received a call from Kramer out of the blue, asking him to design his dream house.

“In all that time,” Kramer assures me, “I did not actively think of him. I had other things, you know.” (Little things -- such as writing *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me, and* cofounding Gay Men’s Health Crisis and ACT UP.) But eventually they fell into bed together again.

“We cuddled,” says Webster. “It was so familiar.”

“We made love. It was weird,” says Kramer. “Not uncomfortable, just ... cataclysmic.”

From that night on, Webster says, Kramer pursued him with all the wiles and will perfected in the activist’s pursuit of anti-HIV drugs. Kramer laughs. “That’s his version,” he says. “I didn’t think I’d be alive now, let alone with him.”

That’s true, Webster says, and in fact Kramer’s mantra in wooing the designer into his design was “I’m a dying man! I don’t have time.” Now, four years after moving in together, Webster still points to Kramer when entertaining guests and exclaims, “Look at him. He told me he was dying! I was tricked.”

Kramer smiles when confronted with this. “He makes me laugh and I like to laugh,” he says. “He just makes me feel good.”

65 in the Fast Lane
Sue Saunders & Clark Reed

A funny thing happened on the way to the formal at Davidson University in North Carolina in 1952. Sue Saunders, then 19, lost her luggage -- and her date, Clark Reed. “It was awful,” she says. “I had to go to the dance in my plain old suit, and Clark acted like it wasn’t worth introducing me to anyone.” Saunders was so hurt that she stopped speaking to the boy with whom she had been going steady since the ninth grade at Fort Lauderdale High.

But as the many fellow seniors she has spoken to about her near-decade living with HIV will tell you, Saunders is unforgettable. Over the following 45 years -- as he became a minister, family man and, in his newest incarnation, a Toronto-based psychotherapist divorcé -- Reed says she was never far from his thoughts: “Sue was my first and greatest love.”

Last fall, driven by a “What have I got to lose?” impulse, Reed tracked her down. After getting over her shock, Saunders agreed to his offer to travel from her Miami Beach home to spend Canadian Thanksgiving with him. “When you’re as sick as I am, you don’t waste time,” Saunders laughs. “I said, ’Sure, I’ll come.’”

“I was amazed and grateful that she was willing to risk renewing such an old friendship,” Reed says. “I was able to communicate what the earlier relationship had meant to me in a way that I couldn’t as a young man.”

“We fell right back into the rhythm,” Saunders says. “I never knew he was so funny. When I was 19, I was going to change the world -- we were all so serious back then.”

And they revisited the events of the night of the 1952 dance. No one should be surprised to learn that Reed has his own -- very different -- version. In a true *Men Are From Mars* moment, Reed told Saunders he had actually been exhausted from working 12-hour days in order to afford tuition, something he hadn't wanted Saunders to worry about. He didn't care what she had on that night, he said. He just wanted to catch some z's.

Once that was cleared up, the 65-year-olds spent the weekend catching up on the intervening half-century. "We went to Niagara Falls, and I let everyone think we were honeymooners," Saunders says. "I used three rolls of film in my camera and thought, 'What if nothing comes out? What if it's all a dream?'"

Did disclosing her HIV status end the dream? Saunders is ready with an answer: "He said, 'Susie, at our age, I'm just glad you're still alive.'"

Three Men and a Lady
Michael Onstatt, Stephen Berman, James & Ila Mae Eagleton

Can we forget the *Three's Company* jokes? In the two decades they've shared as a family of lovers, Michael Onstott, 48, James Eagleton, 59, and Steven Berman, 50, have heard it all, thanks.

When I ask Onstott, who's been HIV positive for 17 years and runs the nonprofit National AIDS Nutrient Bank out of their home, if he ever gets any trouble in his little Northern California town of Guerneville, he just says that they've "developed a thick skin." If anyone does have a problem with these three, they have to get past Ila Mae Eagleton first. Mother Eagleton, 79, couldn't be happier with her three sons -- after all, she has shacked up with them since 1980.

What's their secret, when many of us can't even find one Mr. or Ms. Right? This is how the threesome happened: Eagleton, a student of Aryuvedic medicine long before Deepak Chopra was the toast of the publishing world, and Onstott had been together eight years when Berman appeared on the scene. Eagleton was trading homeopathic recipes with a young woman on a bus bound for a spiritual retreat. "When I heard him talking about the remedy anacardium," says Berman, a most unlikely tax and financial services adviser, "I knew that I had to get to know him."

Eagleton was nervous about introducing his lover to his lover, but Onstott put the situation in perspective. Berman recalls, "He said, 'Well, I can put up with you if you can put up with me.' I felt like I had walked through the looking glass." And they had.

Soon, Onstott began to show signs of infection. "It was 1982, before HIV was discovered," Eagleton says. "We didn't know if it was contagious. I thought all four of us, my mother included, might end up with AIDS. Should we have separate dishes? Was it safe to bathe in the same tub?"

Onstott survived the viral wonderland and is here today, he says, because he used natural medicine for so long before hopping on the protease bandwagon. The three men say they feel at ease supporting each other during medical crises. And Mother Eagleton agrees.

“Living with three men who really love each other gives me a sense of security,” she says. “Each has a mind of his own, but so do I.”

Drama Queens
Chrisanne Blankenship & Alexandra Billings

It was 1976, the Bicentennial. “My friend Darla and I walked into the high-school drama club and found this cute boy sitting under a desk,” says benefits specialist Chrisanne Blankenship, 39, of her wife, performer Alexandra Billings. “We thought, ’How fascinating.’ I was a senior. He was a freshman.”

“She was an older woman, and always will be,” says Billings.

As things happen, Darla snagged the boy, but by the time their 20-year high-school reunion rolled around, Blankenship had won the girl. In fated parallel metamorphoses, Alexandra had traded her male body for a female one and Chrisanne came out as a lesbian.

Their hearts first pitter-pattered when Billings asked Blankenship to direct her in a two-woman show, any two-woman show. Blankenship liked the sound of *Gertrude Stein and a Companion.*

“I thought she was an aviator or something,” Blankenship recalls. “My mother said, ’Uh, that’s about a lesbian.’ I just got really quiet.”

While staging the play, Blankenship says she led her star through marathon line readings every day. “The more we got into the story,” she says, “the more it became our story. I could hear Alex and me talking through the dialogue.”

Still silent about any lesbian leanings, they moved in together, but only because the starving-artist thing gave Billings trouble with rent. Blankenship initially put a three-month limit on the stay, but six months had soon passed.

“One night we had this huge, awful fight,” Billings says. “Very dramatic.”

“She was locked in her room and I was outside, crying,” Blankenship recalls. “I couldn’t take it. I screamed, ’Don’t you realize I’m in love with you?’”

Billings chimes in: "I opened the door and said, ’Don’t *you?*’"

After a whirlwind courtship, they were married in 1995 at Chicago’s Bailiwick theater, one year after Billings tested positive.

Billings says, “Getting the results was the most devastating thing that ever happened to me. ”I was so angry. I always tell people, ’Get angry and stay angry.’ That will force you to places you’ve never been able to go. It just takes work to bring someone with you."

The starry-eyed lovers need as much time together as they can get, considering their packed

datebooks. Blankenship's job as a benefits specialist at an insurer keeps her busy all day, and lately Billings is rehearsing long into the night for the February opening of *Herculena,* a staged adaption of the true story of a hermaphrodite in a convent.

When that's over, Billings will take on the formidable role of Nancy Reagan in the Bailiwick production of Larry Kramer's *Just Say No.* Quality time is of the essence, but from Alex to Alexandra, Gertrude to Nancy, Chrissanne knows she has the best seat in the house for whatever second acts are to come.

Able Mind
Kevin Irvine & Karen Tamley

Kevin Irvine has a tip for straight boys: If you are wearing a Silence=Death t-shirt while chatting up a pretty woman, be sure to mention your ex -- as in girlfriend. That's what he did when he met fellow disability-rights activist Karen Tamley in Albuquerque three years ago.

"She was a beautiful activist, my two favorite qualities. What was there not to like?" asks Irvine, 29. There was, however, one little wrinkle: Tamley, now 31, was living in Denver. Distance slowed things down a bit, but the two found time to flirt at various demonstrations for a year or so before they hooked up and took jobs as advocates in Chicago.

"It's an old city," says Tamley, whose specialty is housing-related access issues. "Everything is so vertical and has so many stairs. For Kevin to find a house that was accessible *and* would take his dog was tough."

What's tough is keeping Tamley -- who "uses a wheelchair" -- and Irvine, who is HIV positive, on the subject of love. Every revelation about their private life leads right back to the politics of disability rights. "Activism makes our conversation rich," Tamley says. "We have a common theme and we don't have to explain everything."

Irvine couldn't agree more: "We understand each other. Many people in serodiscordant relationships have problems because you can't fully understand it until you're in the same boat."

Right now the couple is celebrating a big win for people with hemophilia -- the passage of the Ricky Ray Act, allocating funds to those infected with HIV in the '80s by tainted blood products. "Breathing room" is what Irvine calls the $100,000 price tag that Congress put on his HIV status -- and it helps. So does the romantic Valentine's getaway they're busy planning. "We want to go somewhere sunny and warm," Tamley says. "We're thinking Mexico or the Caribbean."

Irvine has another tip for HIVers looking for love: "People take their cues from you. Rather than assume you will be rejected because of your status, put yourself out there with a positive vibe. Make yourself open."

Tamley, too, wants people to keep the faith. "You really never know what will happen," she says. "One day you meet someone, and your life just changes." We should all know from that.

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