Inside Agitator

Gary Indiana takes a psychedelic trip down memory lane with Ferd Eggan, LA's top AIDS policy maker.

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"I met Ferd Eggan when he first came to Los Angeles in 1990," says Suzi Rodriguez, a short, flame-haired AIDS activist and former drug user described by one colleague as "part careful diplomat and part vicious street fighter." "We were having a community meeting in East LA, with mostly Latinos. He stays after the meeting, introduces himself as the new executive director of Being Alive [an LA coalition of people with AIDS] and says, 'You and I should get to know each other and do some work.' And he spoke to me in Spanish. This really impressed me.

"Two years later I was on LA's AIDS advisory committee when it was screening applicants for the city AIDS coordinator. We had to beg Ferd to apply for that job. He couldn't imagine himself as a bureaucrat. But everybody on the advisory committee -- straight people and gay people and people of color and white folks and people who represented substance abusers and women -- agreed that nobody could take [his predecessor] Phill Wilson's place except for Ferd. I doubt Ferd imagined how good he'd be at it. When he took the job, he had to go out and buy a suit. I'm not sure he'd ever owned one."

When I met Ferd Eggan 30 years ago, this child of Albena, Michigan, looked like a rakish Nordic sybarite: a queerly angled face with concupiscence (a word he'd definitely use) written all over it, a suggestion of world-weary anguish in his hooded eyes, like a figure in a Munch painting, and a broad, scowling mouth that exuded caustic witticisms in a vast, eccentric vocabulary. In the netherworld we lived in then, Ferd was a thinking person's love god, surrounded by many boyfriends and a female fiancée, a dandy whose air of languid, charismatic decadence spoke to a general disenchantment, after Manson and Altamont, with the whole concept of "good vibrations." Our extended dysfunctional family was a not uncommon side dish of the waning counterculture. We were hippie intellectuals, too smart and sour-minded to swallow peace and love without a pinch of heroin. Our Gang, San Francisco, circa 1969.

Ferd is 53, a few years older than I am, and he remembers that time a little differently than I do. "I don't think I was very experienced," he tells me. "We weren't called on to be experienced then. That sex-and-drug milieu had, for me, the new flavor of gay liberation. It wasn't just about being sexy or nasty, it was about being funny and excited about the new lives we were creating for ourselves. Unfortunately, we were full of a fervent belief that the path to wisdom is through the doors of excess. At that time, I guess, I never went far enough down that path to get past the

excess.”

Ferd has now been LA’s AIDS coordinator for seven years. Before that he ran Being Alive from 1990 to 1992, a tenure marked by the organization’s very rapid growth, including its first PWA groups for women, a new PWA dating service, and collaboration with Bienestar, a Latino AIDS organization. Before that, not long after he tested positive in 1986, he’d cofounded ACT UP/Chicago and orchestrated demonstrations over national health care, insurance discrimination and access to medications. And before that…well, the historical threads of Ferd’s narrative are a few too many to gather into a single skein.

“Ferd has been a tremendous asset to the city,” says LA City Council Member Jackie Goldberg, the first lesbian ever elected to that body, "particularly in getting AIDS education out into the workplace. He’s been instrumental in getting the city to permit needle exchange, in spite of federal and state legislation against it, by helping to get the mayor to declare a state of emergency. And he’s done a superb job in connecting with smaller ethnic organizations, particularly among LA’s immigrant communities.

"He doesn’t wait for the phone to ring, let’s put it that way. He sees it as his job to be out in the community, organizing people. And he’s extremely forthcoming about being HIV positive himself, so people take him very seriously.

“The first time I saw Ferd, in 1969, he came to the ratty commune I lived in at 17th and Market to pick up Grenda Pupik, registered nurse and porn star, then featuring in a fuck movie Ferd was directing called Straight Banana. The big innovation in porn at that time was ”plot" -- in this case, nymphomaniac meets exhibitionist. I rode along to the location in Sausalito, and somehow fell into Ferd’s orbit, which meant living for a time with Hamburger Mary, one of his junk buddies, on Leavenworth in the Tenderloin, and later with him and 10 or 12 other people in a quaintly furnished psychic disaster area on Broderick Street. On recent, separate trips to San Francisco, Ferd and I have searched those streets for the houses we lived in then. Like everything else from that faraway time, the memory imprint doesn’t correspond to anything in the current world, though the houses are probably right where we left them. The past really is another country, hidden in plain sight.

A guy named Arthur Ginsberg showed up near the end of the Broderick Street era, in late 1969. He’d started a company called Video Free America, which had gotten the first Sony portapacks in the United States. Well before An American Family, he decided he wanted to shoot an “extended narrative,” a vague project that soon became an endless documentary about Ferd and his relationship with a woman named Carel Rowe. A filmmaker and former paramour of Lenny Bruce, Carel wrote the lyrics for “Cast Your Fate to the Wind,” which could have been the anthem of that whole time. At the very end of that year, Carel and Ferd got married in the living room (a lavish affair, with Coquettes and Hell’s Angels in attendance) and immediately moved to Evanston, Illinois, hoping to become academics. I flew home to Boston and had a nice long nervous breakdown, the onset of which you can see in the video, The Continuing Story of Carel and Ferd.

Ferd says that when he married Carel, "we all thought we were in an Andy Warhol movie -- closer to Trash than Empire. It turns out you can't be in a movie all the time. Evanston was dreary, the marriage was dreary, we both realized it had to end, and I ran from there to this Gay Liberation Front house in Chicago." In the years that followed, Ferd continued his gay activism in San Francisco -- what he calls "one of the most vital periods of my life" -- and then took off for South America.

The Community Development Department (CDD), home to the AIDS coordinator's office, is on the third floor of a building on Sixth Street in downtown Los Angeles. If you know LA, it's always a small surprise to find that downtown is still there: Every so often another plan comes along to "revitalize" it, followed by a plan to raze the entire area. This is how Pershing Square, a two-minute walk from Ferd's office, got turned into a cement garden. I went by there back in February to meet some of the people Ferd works with, and to see his office. It has dark wood, citations framed on the wall and padded leather furniture, like a law office, but its windows face a fleabag SRO, where various hopeless-looking men, some of them naked, stretch and yawn in pitch dark, ugly rooms.

I met CDD assistant general manager Steven Porter, a tall, balding, athletic man in his 50s, who looks 10 years younger. Porter is an original recruit of Tom Bradley's first LA mayoral administration of the early 1970s, brought in to create the antipoverty programs that successive Congresses have transformed into "community development block grants" -- the funds Ferd now uses for AIDS prevention. I asked Porter to tell me everything he could about Ferd in 10 minutes.

"Ferd is Ferd," he began, self-evidently. "How would you replicate someone with that range of talent? He's taken the AIDS office to another level, stepping outside the narrow confines of simply doing the prevention budget -- which, by the way, he increased, since he's been here, from half a million to over two million dollars -- and becoming a major player with the county AIDS office and the HOPWA [Housing Opportunities for People with AIDS] office. He's such an intelligent person, but blended with that is a wonderful skill in diplomacy.

"He's a progressive manager who works through issues in a consensus fashion, driven by research, so that programs relate to quantified need. He can kick ass when he needs to. And he speaks Spanish -- critical with such a high incidence of new AIDS cases in the Hispanic community. He's brought that community into decisions where traditionally it's been excluded."

Not everyone agrees with the encomium. Michael Weinstein, president of the city's largest AIDS agency, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, says, "There's a kind of club atmosphere in LA about funding. When it comes to awarding funding, friends are rewarded, and enemies are punished. Ferd is part of that system."

Or take, for example, the city-administered HOPWA program: "We have criticisms of the program," says Weinstein, "and Ferd defends it. I don't know why he feels he has to do that -- he's not even responsible for administering it."

"We're taking a lot of shots about HOPWA," Ferd responds. "I know there are things badly wrong

with the program, but the attacks are so universal that it becomes impossible to hold onto the good parts of the program."Then he says, "I often have to spend time being the mouthpiece for what I consider administrative mistakes."

I didn't hear from Ferd again until 1978, when I ran into him in a West Hollywood bar. We resumed our friendship for six months out in LA, until I had a near-fatal car crash and moved to New York to recover. After that, Ferd vanished from my screen again until 1987. He'd been living in Chicago, it turned out, and he'd come to New York for a commemoration of the Stonewall riots. We've stayed friends ever since. But you can see from this stuttering history that there are lots of gaps, silences and broad patches of terra incognita in my friendship with Ferd, which is a way of saying I'm no expert on his life before or after I first met him.

FERD IS FERD. In 1999, some of the issues swirling around Ferd's office are: a national conference on women and HIV; problems faced by people who expected to die before the protease era (Ferd is one of them; he says he bought his house never expecting to have to pay off the mortgage) and are now returning to work; a lobbying effort by a group of African-American women demanding more prevention services in their communities.

LA was the first major American city to have an AIDS plan. According to Mary Lucey, a city AIDS policy analyst (Ferd describes her as "a big dyke, an ex-con and the most dedicated PWA I know"), former mayor Bradley "set the tone that allowed that to occur. He prodded the communities to develop a policy." But AIDS policy, like many other contested issues in LA, is schizophrenically divided by the jurisdictional differences between the City of Los Angeles and sprawling LA County. While the city is a Democratic stronghold, the county is, on certain issues, something a little worse than Old California Conservative. It's John Huston-in-Chinatown Conservative.

This schizophrenia affects programs like needle exchange. "The county has never taken a position on needle exchange," Lucey tells me. "But Ferd has pushed it through, and he's been very creative on how to fund it without saying, 'We're buying a bunch of needles.' And we set up needle exchanges in a number of the city's districts, like Hollywood."

I speak with Darrel Cummings, who looks like a stretch version of Terence Stamp and was, until recently, deputy director of LA's Gay and Lesbian Center. "If this were easy for you," he says, "it wouldn't be a Ferd story." He reminds me of some full-page ads that ran two or three years ago in Frontiers, a gay paper that serves, among other things, as the city's best directory of male hustlers, inviting crystal meth users to attend a series of seminars on crystal and HIV transmission.

"They were very Ferdesque," Cummings says, "in that they weren't academic. We held seminars all over the city, recruited people who were using and spent the whole day having incredibly frank conversations. That's not how policy is usually developed, but in this case it was."

I didn't know, in 1969, that Ferd had already worked with CORE, the Congress on Racial Equality, on voter registration in Florence, South Carolina, or that he was eventually run out of town because of an affair he had with a black GI. When I ran into him in 1978, I kind of knew he belonged to the antiracist Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, the above-ground wing of the

Weather Underground, and that this work had brought him to LA -- doing daily analyses for the defense in two trials: one of two members of the American Indian Movement who were accused of the murder of a cab driver in Topanga Canyon, and another of some Weather Underground members accused of plotting to bomb the offices of state senator John Briggs, who was trying to bar gays from teaching in public schools. I sort of knew what he was up to, but I didn't get too close, having some vague fear that my apartment might end up being used as a safe house or an arms depot or who knows what.

Ferd moved to Chicago in 1979 "on assignment" by Prairie Fire to work at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, becoming at one point principal of the group's Pedro Albizu Campos High School. Many people affiliated with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center were supporters of the FALN, an underground group promoting Puerto Rican independence, some of whose imprisoned members recently received clemency from President Clinton. Ferd is still in touch with several of them, and refers to them as "freedom fighters."

"Activist politics of the '70s and '80s were endless meetings, endless attempts to find words to persuade people to support your point of view," Ferd says. "Activism teaches you to try to encourage your friends and neutralize your enemies. All this translates pretty easily into bureaucratic work. If you've given up the illusion that what you do is going to make a revolutionary change, then you're able to work within the situation that you're given without feeling constantly disappointed that a new era isn't being ushered in by your every activity."

"A lot of us who prided ourselves on being on the outside are now on the inside," says Patrick Moore, director of the Estate Project, which catalogues and preserves the work of artists with HIV and those who have died of AIDS. "Certainly at one time that seemed an unimaginable thing. But I think Ferd is unique in the extent to which he's an 'outsider insider.'"

A handsome, corn-fed Midwesterner, Moore moved to New York City to be gay and was immediately swept into the AIDS crisis, getting involved in ACT UP and Visual AIDS. "I first moved to LA in 1995," Moore says, "and Ferd's office had, just the year before, organized a series of arts events called TranscEndAIDS. When the Estate Project expanded from New York to LA, Ferd asked us to produce the second of those events, which his office funded. I can't imagine that happening in New York. And that's certainly not about LA's political savvy, but about Ferd's ability to recognize art as a tool to make AIDS personal to people. Last year Ferd gave us a grant to document artists' work for our Virtual Collection, an image database. He's been supportive in a way that we've never experienced with any other health department."

I've always thought of Ferd as an artist. He has published two books, a volume of poetry and essays called Your Life Story by Someone Else and an art book of naked Polaroids called Pornography. But it isn't always a matter of making works of art. Sometimes it's a question of bringing artistic license into the more regulated and conventional realm of public discourse and policy. I don't know exactly how Ferd has managed to flourish in a bureaucratic context, so I have to assume it's some genius at diplomacy, great reserves of native cunning and a prehensile intelligence that could, let's say, write a novel or a sestina using the same synapses that come

into play at an international AIDS conference or a seminar on crystal meth. Still, Ferd says he yearns for the day when he can return attention to writing; speaking as a friend, I think it’s important for him to write the novel or sestina, too.

“My job is increasingly difficult,” Ferd says, “because, as the epidemic becomes more and more a disaster in communities of color, all of the issues I’ve spent my life learning about, like the intersection of health with poverty and racism and misogyny and homophobia” -- he pauses here, saying, “Sorry for the list” -- “become intensely real. It will probably be important for old, white, radical fags like me to step aside and make a place for the voices of people who are becoming infected now.”

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