# Marked Man

To Activism's Einstein, E=HIV

February 1, 1998 By Peter Kurth

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What does a genius look like? I'm scanning the baggy-clothed club-scene holdovers in New York City's Café Orlin for an artiste swathed in scarves and attitude à la Isadora Duncan. Or Albert Einstein-ish, wild hair and piercing eyes.

Try buzzcut and earring. He's sitting alone, ordering a near-noon breakfast of bacon and eggs with no regard for the vegetarian grazing favored in this beyond-trendy downtown spot. He has on his I-don't-suffer-fools-gladly frown; the ever-present cigarette is at hand.

Meet Mark Harrington, 38, policy director of the Treatment Action Group (TAG), the controversial, self-appointed AIDS advisory panel and think-tank that had its beginnings in a now-legendary split with ACT UP in 1991. He's also a 1997 recipient of a MacArthur Foundation endowment, one of the famous "genius" awards the foundation hands out annually to creative persons in all walks of life. "I don't like using a word as limiting as *genius*," Harrington says. He's plainly anxious not to sound pompous, but he's been saddled with a pretty awesome label. "I prefer the word *prodigy* because it implies a promise of things to come."

Harrington's slice of the MacArthur pie—$240,000 to be dished out in five annual installments—was bestowed in recognition of 10 years' service to the AIDS community, specifically for spearheading TAG's biggest triumph: An overhaul of the billion-dollar federal AIDS research effort. The crusade, which took a mere two years from its start as a 1992 white paper drafted by Harrington and fellow TAGer Gregg Gonsalves, wrested the TAG-designed Office of AIDS Research from the grip of Dr. Anthony Fauci and filled it with a TAG-picked head. This was "insider" activism—no demos, no die-ins—at its best.

"It's a weird year to have gotten this award," he says. "I'd had the sense, after Vancouver and all the hype about the protease inhibitors, that the national media think AIDS is over. This award is recognition that it's not." Harrington is wiry, fair, with red-blond hair and gray-green eyes, and very serious. In conversation, he speaks quietly, firmly—all business. But he gives off a sense of moment, as if he's been called away from a closed-door meeting to address the masses. And, in a way, he has: There are people who have found their life's work in the tragedy of AIDS, and no one more than Mark Harrington. His voluminous white papers—from the 1988 ACT UP critique of the FDA to last summer's "Twilight of the Eradication Hypothesis"—testify to the importance of his efforts. He lives, eats and breathes the epidemic. Peter Staley, a former fellow TAGer, says, "I was

calling Mark our boy genius long before the MacArthur. His remarkable grasp of the issues provided TAG with a great weapon: The ability to differentiate the bullshit and the real in AIDS research."

Scouring the library of treatises, tracts and diatribes built by AIDS activism, you'll find comments from plenty of people who think TAG is an arrogant, elitist, misguided vanity network that has stabbed fellow activists in the back in its rush to glory. Larry Kramer, for one, dismisses TAG as "right-wing" and its members as "faceless, goody-goody former ACT UPers." George Carter, a present ACT UPer, shares Kramer's disdain. "What the hell is TAG doing? It has no community presence. They do their work in their own backroom-type way," Carter says. For example? TAG's federal-research reform failed to address conflicts of interest between scientists and drug companies, a bias that precludes more than token funds to study alternative treatments and the lack of a rule that all drugs be tested in women. "But I will say," he adds, "I've always had enormous respect for Mark."

Many people I spoke to have enormous respect for Mark Harrington—"Mark's been here from the beginning, and we're all very happy and proud that he's been honored in this way," says Martin Delaney, the founder of Project Inform—but not everyone. Ask some, and you get comments of the "arrogant, elitist, misguided" variety. Ask for a quote, and you get zip. "For the record," says an AmFAR staffer who did time in both ACT UP and TAG, "Mark Harrington is difficult."

It's early October. Harrington is just back from Toronto, where he's spent five days at ICAAC, "the Interscience Conference on Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy"—that tongue-twister falls as effortlessly from Harrington's lips as if he were saying "See Spot run." As a member of the panel that put together last year's federal guidelines that revolutionized HIV treatment, Harrington says he's already deeply worried about their actual usefulness for the ever-growing numbers "failing" on protease therapy. And the ICAAC itself was "very depressing," he says, "mainly disconnected scientific reports and self-serving drug company studies urging patients to 'use my drug!' There were no studies on when to start or switch therapies. No studies on protease resistance. No head-to-head studies. The situation looks a little bleak right now," he says with a shrug, "but we've always alternated between too much optimism and too much pessimism."

The AIDS talk only intensifies when Gregg Gonsalves, TAG's liaison in Washington, DC—he is also Harrington's ex-lover—arrives at the café at noon for a weekly policy meeting. TAG, for all its dragon-slaying, has no office; the activists operate out of their own apartments by phone, fax and Internet. With an annual budget of a half-million dollars—half of it drug-company grants—TAG has five full-time staff, two consultants and some 50 volunteers. TAG's glam board extends from star-moguls Barry Diller and David Geffen to stalwarts Dr. Mathilde Krim and Dr. David Ho.

Now, with Gonsalves at the table, I sit back and listen, astonished by the sheer depth of knowledge the two possess. If I didn't know these two had once been lovers—and high-profile ones, at that—I would never have guessed it now. Their chat is earnest—relaxed, friendly, but no frills. Whatever their past, they are plainly comrades now.

The two survey the entire AIDS landscape, swooping down on an intricacy here or an abstraction there with the speed and precision of a pair of eagles. Within half a minute, I hear the words *macrophages, Geneva, third-level resistance* and *vertical transmission* in a string of head-spinning points. It is part drill, part performance, and it doesn't disappoint.

"Did you get my memo about the guidelines?"

"The balance of power now shifts to NIAID."

"Getting down to a once-a-day regimen will be a huge advance."

"The largest unfinished piece is the restructuring of ACTG."

"We need a white paper. Something short. Ten pages."

When the talk is over, we leave the cafe and say our goodbyes to Gonsalves. I wonder what Harrington is feeling as he watches his former lover disappear down St. Marks Place. "Gregg handles Congress for me, for which I'm extremely grateful," is all he says.

We walk in silence and sit down on a park bench. The afternoon is bright and warm. Bladers fly past. Dog walkers, junkies, panhandlers, cops—the standard downtown cast.

Harrington first found his way to ACT UP in 1988 after a close friend got sick. "He had no job, no money, no insurance, no family—he came from a family of homophobes. There was nothing. No options," he says, running his hand through his hair. "And I was at that point in my late 20s, when I wanted to get serious about something."

In Harrington's recollection, ACT UP evolved naturally out of the inventive, eclectic downtown gay scene that was shaking itself awake from the AIDS nightmare. Despair gave way to rage. "It was guerrilla theater, demo drag, direct interventions—in your face," Harrington says. "There was this critical mass of love and support in ACT UP then—it allowed for the expression of countless differences of opinion." He lights a cigarette. "It all blended and melded without effort, but after a few demos, I realized how far we were from where we needed to go." At the beginning, he was "into everything. I had no focus." He paid the bills working "some kind of computer job."

Harrington found himself drawn to the Treatment and Data Committee. Working on a glossary of AIDS terms, he began to dip into the medical literature. He wanted to know not just what the experts were saying, but what they really meant. "And then ACT UP just turned into this strange kind of work," Harrington says. "For the first year, I didn't realize what was going on. I was moving to my calling. I resisted. I thought I'd be in ACT UP for about 18 months, and then there would be a cure, and I could go back to being me."

"So who is Mark Harrington?" I ask finally. After all, the MacArthur grant honors the individual, not organizations.

“Oh, right. ‘When Mark Harrington goes home at night…,’” he says, suddenly twinkly and mischievous. “I’m single. I’m open to suggestions.” He laughs, then says briskly, like a private reporting for duty: “I live in a seventh-floor one-bedroom apartment with a cat named Kitty. Kitty is 12 and all silver. I’ve had Kitty longer than I’ve had HIV.”

Harrington’s absorption in AIDS issues is so total that this reference to his own health comes as a surprise. It’s not that he won’t let me get up close and personal. It’s just that even when our talk turns to his childhood, his education, his love life, AIDS—the “other”—always reasserts itself.

To the extent that we become our parents, Mark Harrington’s activism seems less a choice than a destiny. He grew up in San Francisco, the oldest of four children in a wealthy and well-educated, left-leaning and right-thinking family. “We believed that one needed to make the country a better place,” Harrington says. His father, Richard, is a locally famous attorney who wore love beads under his three-piece suits to defend “pot-smoking conscientious objectors” during the Vietnam War. His mother, Judith, is a painter, James Joyce scholar and longtime champion of integration in the public schools. “The kids went with us on peace marches,” she says, adding that she and her husband are reluctant to take credit for what their son has achieved on his own. “It’s just wonderful when a good mind can engage with important work,” she says, “and I think Mark’s work is going to prove more durable and lasting than ours.”

In 1977, after graduating from Lowell High School—renowned for its academics and diversity—Harrington set out for Harvard. “I thought I’d be a lawyer, like my father,” he says. “But then, the gay thing happened, and Harvard was a pretty homophobic place. And I was into punk rock. By my sophomore year, I was no longer remotely interested in going to law school.” After college, Harrington drifted. “I had three intense love affairs. I was growing up on the personal side and was not at all serious about anything professional,” he says. He dabbled in filmmaking, writing, screenwriting, art, and toyed with the idea of being a rock critic. His later activism bears the marks of these earlier interests—such as the “Read My Lips” two-sailors-kissing poster he designed for ACT UP t-shirts, and the allusions to Patti Smith and Prince that enliven his white papers.

In 1985, while he was “slinging espressos” and delaying the future in Cambridge, Harrington met Jay Funk, a New Yorker. “We fell in love,” Harrington says, “so magical, the big love affair of your 20s, when you’re just so in love.” They did the Europe thing and, after a year, Harrington moved to New York City. “It was the high ’80s,” he recalls. “The Tunnel, Palladium, all those awful clubs.” They broke up not long after Harrington’s arrival. “We lost the battle between the faithful heart and the wandering penis,” he says, though whose penis and whose heart he does not say. “We were both very young and passionate: All or nothing.” Within a few years, Funk was dead of AIDS, and Harrington was on a mission.

For many, the ACT UP/TAG feud is ancient history, recalled with humor as the curtain on a Hatfield-vs.-McCoy melodrama. For others, the resentment still stings. Harrington, who made enemies of allies, says simply: “All the time, all around us, charismatic people were dying. ACT UP itself was degenerating into hugely self-destructive in-fights. We [future TAGers] were spending so much

time defending ourselves rather than really moving on treatment research and action."

Two years after the split, TAG raised another communitywide flap for its reversal on the issue of accelerated approval for AIDS meds, a cause for which ACT UP, Project Inform and Harrington himself had once lobbied hard on the theory that desperate PWAs should have the right to take chances on any potentially lifesaving drugs. But as new drugs came down the line, it became clear to TAG that fast-tracking —"deregulation with an activist face," as Harrington dubbed it—was a double-edged sword, guaranteeing swift access but providing no safeguards or standards. The activists' early cry of "Drugs into bodies!" rang hollow, says Harrington, when one "me-too" drug after another was rushed to market, producing a host of new complications for PWAs.

TAG's maiden voyage was an eye-popping spin on a traditional "action"—enveloping Sen. Jesse Helms' suburban Washington house in a giant David Geffen–bankrolled condom. "We did demos," Harrington says. "But they got no coverage, and they changed no policies." So TAG went "inside" instead. With the election of Bill Clinton to the White House in 1992, Harrington says, "the whole atmosphere and energy were different. The research arm let us in. It marked a change from acts of civil disobedience to acts of Congress. Why do a demo when you can do a phone call?"

For a while, after he tested positive in 1990, Harrington says, he still believed in the magic bullet, "that there must be a drug out there that would be a cure. Something, somewhere, existed—we just all had to put our shoulders to the wheel and shake it loose from the federal bureaucracy." Slowly, however, especially when it came to putting toxic drugs into his own body, he began to reconsider. "You can't shout a cure out of the test tube," he says. His voice trails off. We sit for a while in silence.

I ask the $240,000 question, "So what are you going to do with the money?" Harrington deals me the dish: He threw a party and took a vacation to Barcelona. New furniture and bookshelves fill his East Village apartment. He's hired an accountant. "Maybe I should put some of the money away for retirement?" Harrington muses. "The stock market? Bonds?" After a decade of AIDS, he admits that "even thinking about retirement is all very surreal." Apart from the money, what Harrington most appreciates is "the moral encouragement—the ability it gives you that you didn't have before to seed more work."

The park buzzes with an after-work swarm, and Harrington has a TAG staff meeting. Tying up the thread of our conversation, he declares: "One thing I'm really proud of—TAG's held on to its position. We've secured our ground and kept it." He stands up. "You have to stay where you put yourself," he says. "But you have to watch yourself all the time." He smiles enigmatically and, to my surprise, hugs me quickly—the first time I've ever been hugged by a genius, I would guess.

After he's gone, I remember how often the people I talked to about him cited a speech he gave to close the 1992 International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam as his finest hour. The TAG/ACT UP wound was still fresh. Speaking in front of an audience of 25,000, Harrington laid out a blueprint for a new direction in AIDS research and AIDS activism, characterized by cooperation rather than antagonism. He called for PWAs to put their "bodies on the line"—not by rushing to the barricades

but by taking part in clinical research. Then he showed slides of HIV-infected cells taken from his own lymph nodes and biopsied by Anthony Fauci; they were projected on a vast screen, and later reproduced worldwide in the press. It was also the way many in the audience found out he was HIV positive—a very public coming-out for so private a man. Supporters and detractors alike—and there are legions of both—recall it as a classic “Mark Harrington” moment: The argument was brilliant, the message was hopeful, the names were dropped, and the attention was all his.

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