Quotes: 20/20 Hindsight

Two decades, countless dead, no cure. What now? POZ asked seven friends for their thoughts on the birthday that was never meant to be.

June 1, 2001 By Staff

Twenty years ago, when word first got out, I went into a profound state of shock but thought, “Stick this horror out for three years, and it’ll be over.” As the epidemic went on and on, so did my grief, furor, anxiety and annoyance hat gay life had become a terrifying sci-fi movie. Today I’m stunned to still be standing at all, let alone still being forced to care about this hideous cosmic joke. Happy birthday, AIDS, you fucking freak.

-- *Michael Musto,* The Village Voice

These 20 years have been the saddest of times. I wish I had not seen so many people’s desire for recognition, power, influence or money supercede a commitment to finding the best solution. I wish I had not witnessed the ineptitude of the research and medical response -- mistake after mistake and the same people are still in business. I’ve learned things about society that I would have been happier not knowing.

-- Joseph Sonnabend, AIDS doctor

In 1981, I met most of my gay black men friends at the piers, Man’s Country or Paradise Garage, and I made visits to a friend in the hospital whose lymph nodes were swollen -- but doctors hesitated to call it GRID because he was black. Today, most of my friends are from organizations we created to strengthen our communities in the face of AIDS and invisibility in the gay mainstream.

-- Robert Penn, author

I am still struggling with the same old questions about the isolation of the AIDS experience. At the same time, I discover new consequences in myself: My willingness to step forward when someone is in trouble comes from having had to face, at an early age, that my friends are my responsibility. This has become a deeply embedded determinant in the way I live my life.

-- Sarah Schulman, author

The ever-widening epidemic has coincided with unprecedented trends toward shallowness. We are obsessed with the stock market, *The New York Times* is filled with vapid celebrity stories, and our political system has degenerated into selfish lobbying instead of working toward a greater social

good, which might require more equitable distribution of resources. The belated focus on less developed countries is welcome, but xenophobia and smugness in the West make it unlikely that any of us will really care.

-- Jeff Hoover, contributing editor

We were supposed to have figured it out by now. My “Here we are! Now entertain us” generation believed we’d grow up and save the sinking ship. But even with safe-sex workshops, queer-theory classes and immunology courses, all we have to show for it are boy bands and dot-coms. Oh, and paychecks from our disease-based jobs. What will history make of us, standing on uninflated life rafts in our Kenneth Cole shoes, yelling -- just loud enough to be heard by friends but not heeded by enemies -- “Women and children first”?

-- Kevin O’Leary, contributing editor

I remember the street battles, the funerals, the bigotry, the betrayals, the courage. I remember it all. The last thing we need to do to mark the 20 years is a month of sentimental ceremonies or self-congratulatory black-tie fundraisers for the AIDS bureaucracy. Our hearts may be filled, but there are only two emotions worth expressing at this perilous time: grief and rage. Grief for the millions who have died and are dying. Rage at the indifference, greed and stupidity that permit this grotesque calamity to continue. We should cancel the cocktail parties and start off June in the streets of Washington, DC -- screaming bloody murder.

-- Cleve Jones, NAMES Project

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