



Man on a Mission

Looking back on the longtime advocacy work of Malcom Gregory Scott.

November 13, 2023 By Jay Lassiter

After Malcolm Gregory Scott was discharged from the Navy in 1987 for being gay and subsequently diagnosed with HIV, advocacy became his mission. Scott focused on not only ending the Pentagon's ban on openly gay service members but also overturning sodomy laws that criminalized gay sex.

"Back then, over 30 states still had sodomy laws, and the mainstream LGBTQ organizations didn't want to even talk about sodomy laws," he explains.

Scott, who tested HIV positive during his separation physical from the Navy, spent the early 1990s taunting death while propelling some of the most consequential social changes in American history.

Scott was also an active early member of Washington, DC's chapter of AIDS activist group ACT UP.

"It was queer women who led the way on AIDS activism in DC following the 1987 March on Washington," Scott says. "They wanted a group that was about AIDS and queer liberation. They don't get credit for it."

As the AIDS crisis raged, Scott also became a pivotal voice in the movement to reform America's racist marijuana laws. Back then, cannabis activism was unpopular, including in DC's LGBTQ community.

"ACT UP DC could routinely organize 200 people for a demonstration," he says, recalling the time the group shut down the mayor's office over a hiring freeze that hobbled the city's Office of AIDS Activities. "But for a marijuana demo, we worked hard to organize maybe 20 people. It was a really tough sell."

These days, Scott is working on a documentary about the so-called Lazarus Generation of AIDS survivors who rose from their sick beds to live long healthy lives after effective treatment became available in the mid-1990s.

He's also busy winterizing his 2,400-square-foot backyard garden after a brutal summer in Portland, Oregon, where he now lives, and he plans to add solar panels and a chicken coop next spring.

Scott didn't plant any marijuana this year, however, thanks to last year's bumper crop. That some form of cannabis is legal for most Americans is a tribute to the activism of folks like him.

But pot isn't the only thing growing in Scott's garden. "I planted an apple orchard four years ago, and it's the first year we had apples," he says.

For Scott, who calls gardening a "lifesaving" pastime, there was a time when planning five years ahead was unthinkable.

"In 1993, I was diagnosed with Stage IV AIDS: zero T cells, KS lesions, wasting syndrome—the full scourge—and I was angry, so angry that the anger alone might've killed me if I hadn't found ACT UP."

But that all changed in 1995, when he won a compassionate access lottery and became one of the first people to receive a protease inhibitor, which stabilized his health starting in January 1996.

In his garden, Scott, now 61, often reflects on his unlikely longevity. "When I'm feeling old and creaky and in pain or tired, I just remind myself that not everybody gets to do this."