Memory = History = Knowledge = Power

ACT UP Los Angeles members launch an oral history project. [SLIDESHOW]

February 14, 2022 By Trent Straube

AIDS activists in Los Angeles made history; now, they're working to preserve it. Five former members of the city's AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), which was active from 1987 to 1997, recently launched the ACT UP Los Angeles Oral History Project. Ideally, their goal is to assemble digital interviews with fellow ex-members and offer them to a publicly accessible professional archive.

The project is expected to take a few years and will require more fundraising (you can make a donation on ACTUPLA.org). In the meantime, the project's founders are amassing photos and ephemera—buttons, flyers and T-shirts, for example—and posting images of them, along with interview extracts and videos, on their website, which you can peruse now.

Announced on World AIDS Day, December 1, the history project was motivated by the deaths of former ACT UP members whose histories hadn't been preserved. The project is organized by Mary Lucey, Nancy MacNeil, Jordan Peimer, Helene Schpak and Judy Ornelas Sisneros.

The response to the launch, Peimer says, "has been resoundingly positive. Former members have enjoyed viewing clips and sharing stories, and younger people seem genuinely interested in and appreciative of the work that the group had done."

Peimer points out that many of the ACT UP chapter's accomplishments—creating a hospital ward dedicated to HIV/AIDS, challenging Hollywood to include HIV and queer stories, addressing the health care needs of prisoners living with HIV and launching a needle exchange—came about after lengthy battles but are now considered part of everyday life in Los Angeles.

AIDS ward vigil at LAC+USC Medical Center, 1989Courtesy of ACT UP Los Angeles/Chuck Stallard

Inspired by a speech given by Larry Kramer, ACT UP was born in New York City in 1987. Chapters soon formed in numerous cities and across the globe; each one operated independently, and many remain active today.

ACT UP Los Angeles differed from other chapters, according to the history project's website, notably in its focus on women's and prisoner's rights and on provisions for the county's AIDS ward. "While no organization is perfect," Peimer adds, "ACT UP Los Angeles helped bridge the division in the LGBTQ community between men and women, and ACT UP Los Angeles is notable for the commitment of its female leadership."

Also unique to the Los Angeles chapter was its slogan: "Action=Life." It complements the "Silence=Death" symbol, which was created in 1987 by an art collective in New York City and became synonymous with AIDS activism across the globe.

For related news from the March 2022 issue of POZ, see "ACT UP 101," a primer that educates, entertains and informs about the activist group.

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