How Peter Staley Kept AIDS Denialism Out of "Dallas Buyers Club"

ACT UP activist Peter Staley reveals that story behind the Oscar-winning AIDS film in his memoir, *Never Silent*.

October 8, 2021 By Trent Straube

What better way to honor LGBTQ History Month than with the release of Peter Staley's new memoir. Titled Never Silent: ACT UP and My Life in Activism and featuring a foreword by Anderson Cooper, the book goes on sale Tuesday, October 12, though excerpts, reviews and interviews have been making headlines in the HIV/AIDS world and mainstress press for several weeks.

One tantalizing, never-before-told tale appeared as an excerpt titled "The Controversy Behind the Scenes of Dallas Buyers Club" that ran in Vanity Fair. "When Peter Staley, AIDS activist and an early member of ACT UP, was approached to play a role in Jean-Marc Vallée's 2013 film," teases the magazine's lead-in to the story, "the script raised red flags—here, in an excerpt from his new book, Never Silent, Staley describes his monthslong battle against homophobia and AIDS denialism."

It's a juicy, jaw-dropping behind-the-scenes story about the movie that earned Matthew McConaughey an Academy Award for Best Actor. He played Ron Woodroof, a real-life AIDS activist who founded a buyers' club in Dallas and who died of AIDS-related illness in 1992. Before the advent of modern antiretrovirals in 1996, so-called buyers' clubs sprung up as a way to provide experimental treatments not approved by the Food and Drug Administration to people living with HIV.

"I've never told this story before, and it's a CRAZY ONE," Staley wrote in a Facebook post about the Vanity Fair excerpt. "You won't believe what Hollywood almost filmed with an A-list cast. I made life hell for Jean-Marc Vallée, but thank god he listened. My partners in crime were from the AIDSTruth.org founders (Dr. John Moore, Gregg Gonsalves, etc.), amfAR's Rowena Johnston, and especially Richard Jefferys at TAG. Please share this widely. STOP AIDS DENIALISM."

That is but one episode in the memoir that its publisher, Chicago Review Press, describes as:

> Never Silent tells previously untold stories of the life of the leading subject in David France's

How to Survive a Plague, Peter Staley, including his continuing activism.

In 1987, somebody shoved a flyer into the hand of Peter Staley: massive AIDS demonstration, it announced. After four years on Wall Street as a closeted gay man, Staley was familiar with the homophobia common on trading floors. He also knew that he was not beyond the reach of HIV, having recently been diagnosed with AIDS-Related Complex. A week after the protest, Staley found his way to a packed meeting of the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power—ACT UP—in the West Village. It would prove to be the best decision he ever made. ACT UP would change the course of AIDS, pressuring the National Institutes of Health, the FDA, and three administrations to finally respond with research that ultimately saved millions of lives. Staley, a shrewd strategist with nerves of steel, organized some of the group's most spectacular actions, from shutting down trading on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange to putting a giant condom over the house of Senator Jesse Helms. Never Silent is the inside story of what brought Staley to ACT UP and the explosive and sometimes painful years to follow—years filled with triumph, humiliation, joy, loss and persistence. Never Silent is guaranteed to inspire the activist within all of us.

Peter Staley’s memoir, “Never Silent,” is released October 12, 2021.Courtesy of Chicago Review Press

Staley will be promoting the book at an in-person event at the LGBT Community Center in Manhattan on Tuesday, October 12, and then at New York City’s iconic Strand Book Store on Thursday, October 14, where he’ll be in conversation with fellow legendary AIDS activist and historian Sarah Schulman.

Avid POZ readers are surely aware of Staley’s work, including recently in the PrEP4All Collaboration and as the main plaintiff in Peter Staley, et al. v. Gilead Sciences, Inc., et. al., a federal antitrust case against HIV drug manufacturers. Look for a feature about his memoir and activism in a future issue. Meanwhile, check out his POZ blog; his latest entry “The Roaring Twenties Are in Full Swing” posits that “while PrEP and U=U will reduce our community HIV viral load, other STIs are about to soar.”

And don’t miss our interviews with Schulman about her own nonfiction works Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993 and Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair.

Consider this your LGBT History Month homework!

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