Searching for ACT UP

Read an excerpt from *Never Silent: ACT UP and My Life in Activism* by Peter Staley.

October 25, 2021 By Peter Staley

MY NEW MISSION WAS BUYING TIME. How could I forestall what seemed inevitable—dying from AIDS as a young man? Could I bolster my immune system or take an experimental drug that would add months, or even years, to the running estimate in my head of how much time I had left?

Based on what I was reading about the HIV life cycle, I knew my three-hundred-odd T cell count wasn't in the danger zone, yet . . . but it wasn't that far from it either. Below two hundred is when your chances of getting an opportunistic disease rise significantly, so I figured that as long as I stayed above that, I had at least two years ahead of me. If I dropped below that? Then the two-year clock would start ticking down.

HIV itself doesn't kill you. Instead, it slowly depletes your T cells. And once your immune system is severely weakened, some other bug or cancer takes advantage and knocks you off, grabbing the opportunity that HIV has cleared the way for.

Many of these diseases were considered rare before HIV came along. Kaposi's sarcoma, the skin cancer with its purple blotches that became a defining characteristic of a dying AIDS patient, and Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) were the two biggest killers. If I was going to buy some time and a few extra ticks on my doomsday clock, I'd have to learn about KS and PCP, and much more.

But first, I made an emotional detour that almost led me astray: I came very close to moving to Amsterdam. I was so terrified of the possibility of not having a partner during the hard months and years ahead, someone who would be there during those scary nights when I'd wake up having soaked the sheets with sweat, that I desperately latched on to my relationship with Peter [Launy, my Dutch boyfriend who was visiting New York when I was diagnosed], who was back in Amsterdam attending law school.

I begged him to move to New York. I even offered to pay his tuition at one of the city's law schools. He rightly hedged, knowing that if the relationship floundered, he might be left high and dry. Since luring Peter to New York didn't work, maybe I could move to Amsterdam—the bank had an office there.

Peter Staley (left) and Peter Launy in Amsterdam, 1985Courtesy of Peter Staley

After consulting with Jes, [my brother who also worked at Morgan Guaranty,] I marched into my boss's office and told him a story that had a touch of truth to it, wrapped in a bunch of lies. I had fallen in love during my vacation in Amsterdam, and we were now engaged to be married. My future wife was a Dutch lawyer, and she and I had decided it was probably easier for me to get a job there than the other way around. So could I transfer to Morgan's Amsterdam office?

Kalaris had always been a great boss, and he didn't let me down this time. He worked the phones, convincing our Amsterdam branch to let me transfer there, while setting-up a one-month training program for me at our London office. By April 1986, I had moved into the five-star Brown's Hotel in London on Morgan's dime and was training in the European markets.

But London had lost all the joy I experienced during my junior year abroad. The city hadn't

changed much in five years, but I sure had. No longer the young explorer living, for the first time, in a big and vibrant city, I was now there for desperate reasons, ripping up roots, fighting off the depressing effects of London's drizzly, sunless days. I spent each night alone in the hotel, and worked each day on a windowless trading floor with other miserable traders who viewed me as an annoying outsider whom they didn't have time to train.

I quickly felt overwhelmed.

And that was before I got sick.

When the night sweats woke me in my lonely hotel room, it was a cruel reminder that my body was being overrun by a deadly virus. In the morning, I had a high fever, so I called in sick. It felt like a terrible flu, but what if it was something worse than that?

The hotel kept a doctor on call for its guests. Should I reach out? What would I even tell this doctor? It felt too risky to tell someone I didn't know that I had the world's scariest disease. So instead, I just laid there in bed, on sheets still damp from sweat, feeling the full burden of fear and loneliness that AIDS might bring me in the years ahead.

I eventually asked the hotel to send its doctor. But I kept my secret, and without the full picture, he gave me some prescription-level acetaminophen. I called in sick for a second day, and hoped my "flu" was just a flu. And thankfully, it was. But I would be hit by random night sweats for years to come, my constant reminder of the millions of virions attacking my T cells.

After I finished my training in London, I returned to New York to begin packing for the move to Amsterdam. But then one man's decision thwarted my plans.

Kalaris called me into his office, saying, "I've got some bad news." The bank's CEO, Lewis Preston, had announced an international restructuring that would focus on cities with the largest trading markets—New York, London, Frankfurt, and Tokyo—while downsizing the bank's footprint in smaller markets. They'd be reducing staff in Amsterdam, and there was no way the branch could bring in an expat while it was laying off locals.

Just like that, my plans for living with Peter in Amsterdam were dashed. I called my brother Jes and started to sob. It was only the second time I had broken down in tears after my diagnosis-it was all finally sinking in. For the first time in my life, I had lost control of my fate. I knew I couldn't control when AIDS would kill me, but I had compartmentalized that fear and stayed focused on everything I could control: my career, my love life, the months or year or two years in front of me. I was losing grip on all of those things.

Within months, the relationship with Peter unraveled. We were both twentysomethings and too immature to handle the stress that my diagnosis was putting on our long-distance, on-again-off-again romance. In retrospect, I had dodged a bullet. If I had moved to Amsterdam, I would have missed the life-changing events that started happening in New York City during the months ahead.

Without a boyfriend, and with none of my immediate family living in New York, I had a woefully small support network. Tracey was a godsend, shouldering most of my sadness and fears. But I needed to find fellowship with those who were facing my same fate. I was still in the closet, not knowing a single person living with HIV, when I walked into an AIDS support group in the West Village run by Gay Men's Health Crisis, hoping to be inspired and meet others who, like me, were actively fighting for more time.

There were about twenty gay men seated in a circle, along with a counselor from GMHC. Again and again, I heard fear and resignation from the health scares and stigma the men had experienced. Many lamented that they would never have sex again. Then a wild-looking guy across from me chimed in. "I'm sorry, but I'm not about to stop having sex," he said. "Just use a condom!"

I chuckled at his boldness while others squirmed. He noticed my reaction and continued with a campy rant on how there was no way in hell he was going to stop living to the fullest.

What a sight he was: spiky blond hair, a black leather biker jacket and blue jeans, black boots, and too many piercings to count. He was a lesson in contrasts, with a defiantly effeminate voice and mannerisms and don't-fuck-with-me looks. I was instantly drawn to this fiercest of queens, so as the meeting ended, I made a beeline toward him. I explained that this was my first time meeting others who were infected. "I loved a lot of the things you said tonight. Can I buy you a cup of coffee so we can talk some more?"

Peter Staley (left) with Griffin Gold, 1987Courtesy of Peter Staley

His name was Griffin Gold. He was an activist—a cofounder of the People with AIDS Coalition (PWAC)—and I latched on to him for dear life. Within a week, we had slept together, otherwise known as a gay handshake. Griff's funky one-room basement apartment was at the corner of Christopher Street and Gay Street in Greenwich Village, an intersection that screamed queer activism and suited him well.

Soon after, I was introduced to Michael Callen, one of the city's most outspoken AIDS activists and another cofounder of the People with AIDS Coalition, and Michael Hirsch, its executive director, who later founded Body Positive. Griff lured me to PWAC's small office inside donated space at a local church. "We can meet there before lunch, and you can see where things really happen," he said.

With Gold, Callen, and Hirsch, I had found the beating heart of AIDS activism in New York: HIV-positive gay men who demanded to be heard and to live without stigma.

I was also hearing their anger. Anger at President Reagan for barely mentioning the crisis. Anger at Mayor Ed Koch for his timid response in this city with more AIDS deaths than any other. Anger at the press for rarely mentioning AIDS and, when they did, for calling them "victims" instead of people living with HIV.

Griffin introduced me to a small trove of literature to help people with AIDS learn about any and all possible research leads to fight the virus, including PWAC's Newsline, and AIDS Treatment News,

published by John James in San Francisco. I read all the back issues in the coalition's possession.

As I climbed this learning curve, my anger began to match that of the activists I was meeting. We were almost six years into the epidemic, and our government didn't seem to care. Those in power were standing by, just letting us all die.

Back in 1976, I was living just outside Philadelphia when a new disease killed twenty-nine people attending an American Legion convention. Our government went into high alert to find the cause and stem the epidemic of what had been dubbed Legionnaires' disease. Within two months, The New York Times had run sixty-two stories about the outbreak-eleven of them on the front page. But the Times waited two years after the first reported AIDS cases to run a front-page story about what was already a far deadlier epidemic. There wasn't a single television network news story on AIDS until a full year had passed after the first deaths in 1981.

Along with my growing anger, I experienced my first taste of grief. Griff asked me to join him at a memorial for Michael Calvert, the first PWAC board member to die from AIDS. I had only met Calvert once, just before he returned home to Atlanta around Thanksgiving. He had looked perfectly healthy but was dead by January.

His memorial was in February. And in March 1987, I finally found a place to channel my anger and grief after I was handed a flyer on my way to work, a flyer announcing ACT UP's first demonstration, prodding me to attend my first ACT UP meeting.

Morgan Guaranty Commercial Bank Training Program, 1983Courtesy of Peter Staley

I left Morgan's chandeliered headquarters in my suit and tie and starched white shirt, and fifteen minutes later walked into the linoleum-tiled, paint-peeling ground-floor meeting hall at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center on West Thirteenth Street. I felt like a closeted Clark Kent becoming a gay Superman, my true self, in an entirely new and surreal world.

The Center's hall was full. With every seat taken, folks stood along the sides and back, gay men from all walks of life but also a surprising number of women—the lesbians who had far more experience with activist movements than most of the guys in the room. At twenty six, I was one of the younger attendees, but not the youngest. A few looked fresh out of high school. If my age didn't stand out, my suit and tie did. You could count those of us in business drag on one hand.

The room crackled with raw emotion. Folks were desperate, but even the sickest among them were fit for a fight. With the huge press response from ACT UP's first Wall Street demonstration, no one seemed to doubt that history was being made. Alumni from the Stonewall riots were there too, and you could feel their relief as the community was coming alive again in the face of death, righteously angry and more than ready to take action. Youthful arrogance powered many of us in our teens and twenties. This was our moment—ACT UP could be our Stonewall.

Someone suggested using the federal tax filing deadline in two weeks as a launching point for the next demo, especially since we were demanding that some of our taxes go toward AIDS research. “Let’s fill the front steps at the General Post Office Building as thousands of folks are rushing in before the deadline,” someone else chimed in. It was communal brainstorming at its best.

And, holy fuck, look at that guy in the tight bicycle shorts that just walked in. The room was as cruisy as my first night in Heaven. The tightly packed bodies in the standing-room-only section listened intently but had plenty of time to look around, lock eyes, and get acquainted. Since my diagnosis a year and a half ago, I had only had sex once, with Griff, but now it seemed like I had a fighting chance of further breaking the drought.

ACT UP general membership meeting at the LGBT Center in New York City, 1987Courtesy of Peter Staley

While the cruising was fun, what smacked me in the face the hardest at that first, long meeting was a sense of community. Sure, I had been with throngs of gay men on dance floors, where I felt that beautiful bond of sexual freedom, but this was something entirely different. The stakes were enormous, because our fucking survival as a people was on the line. By now it was obvious that no one else would save us. We realized that our only chance to stop the slaughter was in this room.

At my first few meetings, I stood with others in the back, just taking it all in. Two facilitators ran each meeting with genial efficiency. After introducing themselves, they’d lay out the ground rules, from how motions were made to how debates were handled. Every decision our new movement made was put to a majority vote by all the members who showed up that week. It was the purest form of democracy I had ever witnessed, for better or worse, and I was fascinated by the ebb and

flow of our debates. A proposal could become imperiled after a single impassioned objection from one member, then be saved five minutes later by an even more impassioned defense from someone else. The good debaters-confident speakers who could gauge how a discussion was going and time a pivotal interjection-could swing the room in their direction just as the facilitators pressed for a vote. I was drawn to those with this talent, and hoped to emulate them in the months ahead.

One in particular caught my eye. Michael Nesline was tall and slim, with a gorgeous head of light brown hair and a long, sharply sculpted face. His voice was confident and booming, and he raised his hand often in those early meetings, always making succinct points that would summarize and advance the discussion. By that summer, he was standing in the front, facilitating our semistructured chaos.

Like many of the gay struggling artists/actors in the room, Michael lived in the East Village, which had the cheapest rents in Lower Manhattan. He drove a cab to pay the rent.

He was also ACT UP's first treasurer, and that was my excuse to introduce myself. Since I was still closeted at work, I didn't want to take the risk of joining others on the front lines during demonstrations, getting arrested, and appearing on TV. But I could help in other ways, behind the scenes. After a meeting in late June, I walked up to Michael and handed him a check for a thousand bucks, payable to ACT UP.

At Woody's in 1989. From left: Ned Brinkley, Tom Keane, Andrew Miller, Lee Schy, Tim Hazel, Stephen Gendin, Michael SavinoTom Keane

"A bunch of us are going to grab some dinner at Woody's—want to join us?" he asked, after thanking me for the donation.

“Sure!“ I replied.

I quickly learned two things. First, the bunch of folks Michael referred to were the unofficial leaders of ACT UP, the hard-core founding members who chaired its new working committees and spent almost every night planning our next demonstrations and discussing how to structure the organization. And second, Woody’s was the restaurant a few blocks south of the Center where they kept working after our Monday-night meetings. Just add greasy food, gossip, and lots of alcohol.

This cabal of a dozen rowdy activists would push together a bunch of tables toward the back of the restaurant’s windowless overflow room, which was downstairs past the bar. Woody’s was typically dead late Monday night, so the ACT UPers usually had the overflow room to themselves.

There was Larry Kramer, the controversial writer who had been semi-banished from the gay community after publishing Faggots, a tell-all (and some say moralizing) novel about gay life on Fire Island in the 1970s. But by now, he was a community treasure. Kramer had cofounded GMHC, and he had recently delivered a powerful speech at the Center that sparked the formation of ACT UP.

And there was Maxine Wolfe, the wise older lesbian with war stories from prior movements, who would trash-talk her gay male contemporaries, including Kramer. She was “one of the boys,” just smarter and more mature than everyone else in the room.

Larry was fifty-two, and Maxine was forty-six, and both appeared to be the oldest in this budding ACT UP clique. Maria Maggenti, at twenty-five, was probably the youngest, and had an infectious energy and optimism that would carry us through some dark times ahead.

Bradley Ball and Ron Goldberg at Woody’s, 1987Tom Keane

Others that stood out to me included Bradley Ball, only six months my senior but seemingly far older in campy-cynical-gay-humor years. He became ACT UP’s first administrator, tirelessly doing the thankless work of keeping the group from collapsing into a bureaucratic sinkhole.

And Avram Finkelstein, the handsome intellectual artist and founding member of the Silence = Death Project, which had plastered its stark posters across Manhattan months earlier. I remember seeing them on every construction site I’d pass on my bus ride to work, pink triangles on pitch-black canvases with a gut-punch warning: SILENCE = DEATH. Those posters sparked our movement as much as any activist did.

In the weeks ahead, as Michael and I drew closer, I’d meet most of the other founders over pitchers of beer in the bowels of Woody’s. Many were gorgeous young men like Avram’s hunky boyfriend, Steven Webb. And Chris Lione, also with the Silence = Death Project, with his sexy pornstache. And Eric Sawyer, and Michael Savino, and Frank Jump, and Alan Klein, and Karl Soehnlein, and Bill Bahlman, and more, and more as we kept adding tables to our growing unofficial politburo.

Though Larry Kramer's reputation for angry outbursts and confrontation was often reinforced during our Monday-night meetings, he surprised us at Woody's, revealing a kind and loving Dr. Jekyll to his more public Mr. Hyde. For years he had been advocating for a more aggressive community response to AIDS, and now he was finally witnessing his dream come true.

Larry seemed most enthralled by the younger members of ACT UP. He understood that new blood was essential for a new movement's survival. If it had only been a reunion of the old guard from the post Stonewall civil disobedience groups, most of which had self-destructed, then their old dramas and baggage would just get replayed. He drew so much hope from the energy and novel ideas these fresher faces brought to our meetings and social gatherings that he even started calling us his children. And on those late Monday nights, he seemed like the proudest Jewish mother in New York, grilling us about our backgrounds, our jobs, our sex lives, our loves, and our dreams. To this day, I never saw a happier and more alive Larry Kramer than the one sharing toasts with us at Woody's in the summer of 1987. If I was one of his children, then it is equally true that he was a father figure to me, one whose approval I would seek from that time forward.

Rod Goldberg, Michael Savino and Michael Nesline at Woodys, 1987Tom Keane

At the Center and at Woody's, I was discovering the safety of a second family. With Larry and Maxine as the stand-in parents, and the plethora of brothers and sisters in arms, ACT UP became my church, my reason for being, and my source of hope.

Meanwhile, Michael and I were fucking like bunnies. Safe bunnies, of course. Michael had tested HIV negative, and we became early adopters of ACT UP's radical spin on the so-called condom code that gay men started living by in 1985, after the CDC announced that condoms effectively block HIV transmission.

ACT UP's spin on safe sex in the age of AIDS was its equal emphasis on both words—we know how to be safe, so we're going to have plenty of sex, and so can you! AIDS had reinforced America's homophobia, with a backlash against gay men specifically, about how and how often we had sex. Anal sex became the most offensive sin of its time, the reason we deserved to die.

ACT UP's great conceit was to refuse to tread lightly against this backlash. We were righteously sex positive and aggressively celebrated sex between men. We held kiss-ins—flash demonstrations where we'd all deep kiss each other, only coming up for air to switch partners—at some of the most popular straight bars in the city. We wheat-pasted hundreds of flyers around town showing a close-up of a fully erect penis with the instruction, MEN: USE CONDOMS OR BEAT IT.

If ACT UP was our church, then we certainly practiced what we preached. It was considered treasonous among ACT UP members to stigmatize an HIV-positive person in any way, including sexually. The science was clear that condoms worked; annual HIV infections quickly dropped after gay men started using them religiously in 1985. ACT UP was a living laboratory that proved the science again and again and again. Nightly. We proselytized less fear and more joy, countering the hatemongers and finger-waggers. Safe sex works! Enjoy safe sex!

Michael and I certainly did. I latched onto this new relationship for dear life, just as I had with Peter. Even if it didn't make sense with our mismatched personalities, I was desperate to have a partner by my side during my final months of life. Yet later that summer, the juggling act—with my new boyfriend, the trading job, the nightly activism, and a falling T cell count—started to shake.

The first ball I dropped, more than once, was my Wall Street job. I tried to compartmentalize my bond trading career from my diagnosis and fight to stay alive. I decided to keep the career going as long as my health allowed, as if I weren't sick at all. But in this case, compartmentalization led to some really stupid decisions.

A new trading firm, Chicago Research & Trading, had set up shop on Wall Street. CRT Securities started actively poaching bond traders from other firms. At Morgan Guaranty, I was still trading short-shorts, the quietest end of the bond market, and had yet to be promoted up the yield curve, where the stakes were higher. CRT offered to let me trade the high-volume two-year notes, along with a signing bonus and more than double the salary. Ignoring the added stress this might have on my health, I took the bait and left Morgan.

I immediately started losing money trading the two-year notes. The arbitrage bets I had placed in short-shorts took a while to set up and pay off, but with the two-year notes, I had to predict the market's direction in the minutes, days, or weeks ahead. I second guessed myself constantly. At first, my losses were small, but they slowly kept growing.

Meanwhile, I blindly threw another ball into the air, saying yes when Michael asked if I'd take over as head of ACT UP's fundraising.

Less blindly, I had to risk another ball in the air for my compartmentalized but increasingly scary HIV life: I started taking AZT, the first drug approved for AIDS. And it kicked my ass. The researchers behind the first studies decided that hitting the virus as hard as possible offered the best chance of controlling it, so the initial dosing was high. A patient had to take the drug every four hours, day and night, including a dose while you were normally fast asleep. It caused anemia in about half the patients who tried it.

Unfortunately, I was in the unlucky half. I began to look ghostly pale and felt exhausted all day. When I wasn't losing money at CRT, I was nodded off at my trading desk, which should be impossible to do in such a noisy and stressed-filled environment, not to mention being financially hazardous. By mid-October, I threw in the towel and stopped taking AZT. It felt like a crushing defeat. I was unable to handle the only drug approved to fight HIV.

Front page of The New York Times on October 20, 1987Courtesy of Peter Staley

Then came Black Monday.

On October 19, 1987, the Dow Jones Industrials dropped by almost 23 percent, one of the largest single-day drops in history. It wasn't a complete surprise; the markets had been acting spooked, with two big sell-offs the week before. I was concerned enough to protect my own savings, selling out of stocks four days earlier and parking it all in a money-market fund that was safe from the chaotic swings.

When stocks crash, big investors flock to U.S. government bonds, a so-called flight to quality. As I sat at my trading desk that Monday, the sales force started barking at me with desperate orders from CRT's customers. A trickling of calls soon became a flood. All day long, I was furiously buying the notes from other Wall Street firms a few seconds before, or a few seconds after, selling those same notes to a customer, often taking losses on each flip. As each hour ticked by, the Dow kept plunging and my losses mounted. I was panicking, as if swimming as fast as possible so as not to drown. If I had loaded up on two-year notes before that fateful Monday, I would have made a small fortune for CRT. Instead, my losses were worse than ever.

On the bus ride home that evening, I decided to visualize a calming scene for myself at home, preplanning how I wanted to emotionally cope behind closed doors by smashing some dinner plates against a wall. As soon as I walked into my apartment, I grabbed the less-used pile of plates, as planned, from two unmatched sets, walked to my bedroom, and set the plates down on the floor. One at a time, I threw each plate at the exposed brick wall as tears rolled down my face. It was a methodical rage—at myself, at all the shit life had been throwing at me, and at how poorly I was handling it.

I desperately needed to let the rage out, and this exercise worked. Halfway through the pile of plates, I was sobbing. But before the last plate could hit the wall, Michael, who was living with me at that point, walked in. The meltdown scared him, and he tried to stop me, but I pushed him off, ignoring his pleas until I was done.

Finally, when I had no more plates to throw, Michael tentatively put his hand on my arm and again asked just what the hell was going on. I dropped to my knees, picking up the big pieces first as I tried to explain through tears my rage about missed profits, even comically detailing what "flight to quality" meant. Michael joined me on the floor, carefully picking up all the porcelain shards.

Michael NeslineCourtesy of Peter Staley

That’s when I cut my thumb on a broken plate. Michael had been taking classes to become a nurse, and he leaped into Nurse Nesline mode. He led me to the bathroom to clean and bandage the small cut. In was then, during this awkward moment among the three of us—Michael, me, and the millions of HIV virions dripping from my thumb—that my nurse and boyfriend decided to prove how unafraid he was of the intruder between us.

He looked at the small drop of blood on my thumb and licked it off.

Now, without forethought, I truly snapped. “What the fuck, Michael!”

I yanked my hand away and launched into a tirade about not taking risks with the killer inside me. Michael was fully cowed: mouth agape but not able to speak. The pooling in his eyes was his only response.

Unable to keep juggling so many balls, I broke off our relationship two weeks later.

Usually with breakups, one person is the asshole and the other gets his heart broken. I usually got my heart broken during the breakups in my life. But this time, I was the asshole. I had latched on way too hard within weeks of the relationship starting, then abruptly ended it four months later as it dawned on me that we weren’t the best match.

Even though the relationship had a less-than-Hallmark-movie ending, we’ve stayed in touch, and

neither of us regrets our dramafilled fling during the first months of a new movement. He saw me hit an emotional bottom since my diagnosis almost two years earlier, and he didn't run away. Memories like that, and people like Michael, stick with you.

After the meltdown, I did what any unstable New Yorker with a savings account does: I found a good shrink. Dixie Beckham was a psychotherapist who had earned a reputation working with people with AIDS, another shining example of the lesbians who fought for and took care of gay men at death's door.

She quickly encouraged me to decompartmentalize my life, to face it all squarely and see what did and didn't make sense. In the months ahead, we would double down on what made sense and take a cleaver to what didn't.

So I doubled down on ACT UP. While my closeted Wall Street life still prevented me from getting arrested at our demos, I could safely throw myself into raising money to fund them. As head of fundraising, I also sat on ACT UP's Coordinating Committee, a group that was largely powerless but full of drama queens, where information from our various committees was theoretically shared and their work was theoretically coordinated.

My nights quickly filled up with meetings and fundraising projects. But my weekdays were filled with the soul-crushing job at CRT, where my bond trading losses slowly mounted. Something had to give.

That something was my T cell count, which dropped to 171 by February, four months after Black Monday. This was the first time it had dipped below 200, entering the danger zone where the odds of getting hit by an opportunistic infection rose sharply. This was the point when doctors, if pushed for a prognosis, would say, "You've got about two years left, Mr. Staley."

For weeks, Dixie had been preparing me for this moment, gently nudging me not to separate my career on Wall Street from my health care reality, hinting that I was holding on to a job that made less and less sense. It was probably costing me some T cells, and it was definitely fucking with my mental health.

She also pointed out that the only time I smiled or expressed any joy during our sessions was when I talked about my life in ACT UP. "You could go on disability and dedicate yourself to the activism work that really matters to you," she suggested at one point, further planting the seeds for a great leap into the unknown. All I needed was one last good push. And the lab results about the lower T cell count had sure shoved me hard.

The very next morning, I walked onto the trading floor at my usual time, but surprised my boss, John, the head of CRT's New York headquarters. First, I asked him for a private discussion in his office. Then I told him I was HIV positive.

“Today will be my last day here,” I said.

I explained that my latest T cell count had fallen to a dangerous level, so I’d be going on disability. I told my boss that he could share my medical news with the other traders at tomorrow morning’s staff meeting. “Feel free to tell them the truth … the whole shebang—including that I’m gay.”

Although John was stunned, he acted professionally, expressing compassion and concern. Since there was nothing of personal value at my trading desk, I walked straight from his office to the elevators, never looking back. My short, topsy-turvy career on Wall Street had ended.

As soon as I got back to the apartment, I called Lou [Olivieri, my bond trading broker and best friend on Wall Street], who was at his broker’s desk at Garban. “It’s done,” I said.

I had given Lou a heads-up the day before, just after the blood results came back. We both wondered aloud how our small world of bond traders and brokers would react. Lou agreed to arrive at work early the next morning so he could monitor the chatter over the direct phone lines that connected all the trading desks in New York, Tokyo, and London.

The traders in Tokyo would be winding down their day just as my former boss, John, broke the news. Lou’s phone bank started to light up within minutes of that staff meeting.

“It’s out,” Lou told me on one line while he held a second phone to his other ear, fielding a flood of calls coming into his switchboard.

“That was fast,” I said. But neither of us was surprised. The phones that connected our market were the most efficient news and gossip relay system on the planet. It’s how I learned that Rock Hudson had AIDS hours before it appeared on TV. And now “Peter Staley has AIDS” was ricocheting around the bond market at a similar clip.

“They just heard in Tokyo,” Lou said about fifteen seconds later.

In the days that followed, only three of my former colleagues from Morgan Guaranty called to ask how I was doing. Bill Schreiner was the first. And then Tommy Kalaris called. As always, he impressed me with his empathy and frankness, and even offered some levity.

“So I’m guessing that girl you almost moved to Amsterdam for was actually a guy,” he said.

“Um, yeah-sorry about bending the truth on that,” I said.

“It’s all good,” he said.

Peter Staley's first arrest was at ACT UP's first anniversary action on March 24, 1988.Courtesy of Peter Staley

Less than a month later, I returned to Wall Street, not to trade but to protest. It was March 24, the first anniversary of ACT UP, and we decided to show the world our staying power by returning to the same intersection, where Wall Street ends on lower Broadway, only this time in far larger numbers than the year before.

My transition from bond trader to radical activist was almost complete. I had only to join my new family-the angriest queers in New York, if not the world-to lay down our bodies in wave after wave while cars honked and cameras rolled.

In the past year, I had avoided arrest. I would hold a protest sign close to my face, making sure not to be captured on film, not wanting to risk losing my pointless job. But here I was joining the first wave of many waves of activists who sat down on the hard pavement, becoming part of history's next great tide of civil disobedience.

"ACT UP! FIGHT BACK! FIGHT AIDS!" we chanted as the cops and cameras moved toward us. And when a beautiful young reporter with perfect makeup and a stylish winter coat thrust a microphone toward me, her TV cameraman close behind, I didn't shy away when she asked me, "Why are you here today?"

I tried my best to stick to the ACT UP script of practiced sound bites as the cops gave their warning, announced through a bullhorn, that we would soon be arrested if we didn't move from the street to the sidewalk.

Instead of following the law, one by one we went limp. It was just as we had practiced during the civil disobedience trainings conducted by some of our lesbian members who had experience in

prior movements. Teams of officers were forced to drag us to waiting vans. As two cops pulled me toward the van, each tightly gripping one of my arms, I kept chanting our movement's slogan, adding to a cacophony—police sirens wailed, cars and trucks honked, and hundreds of my comrades chanted as one.

And those poor cops. Once the intersection was clear, another wave of activists would replace those dragged away, on and on, until 111 of us filled the holding cells at three downtown police precincts.

At the NYPD's First Precinct, an officer held my hands firmly as he pressed my fingertips and thumbs between an inkpad and fingerprint card. I was led to a holding cell that was already packed with other ACT UPers, and the few hours we spent there passed quickly, filled with gossip and camp humor. Cute cops would pass by and we'd all whistle and taunt them—"What a big billy club you have, officer!"—triggering our own endless giggling fits.

With a heady mix of exhilaration and exhaustion, I got home just in time to catch our coverage on the local news. Flipping through the stations, I stopped when I saw the reporter who had asked me what I was doing there. As I answered, a caption appeared below my face: PETER STALEY, AIDS VICTIM.

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

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/peter-staley-never-silent-searching-for-act-up