Diana, Princess of Wales

Her personal struggle symbolized the trails and triumphs of people living with AIDS.

December 1, 1997 By Nick Partridge

I first met Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1987, right before she was due to dedicate the first AIDS ward in the United Kingdom. I was unprepared for her openness and humor, and I wholly underestimated the worldwide impact that her presence at the Middlesex Hospital that day would have.

Images of Diana meeting people with AIDS, holding their hands and being so at ease, flashed around the world. South African President Nelson Mandela summed up this event's significance on her death: "We saw her sitting on the bed of AIDS patients and shaking hands with them, and that changed perceptions dramatically." At that time, South Africa, like many other countries, was in deep denial about the growing impact of HIV—and here was a fairy-tale princess confirming its reality.

Diana was part of a generation deeply affected by the epidemic. The dates of her brief life, 1961–1997, mirror those seen on too many memorial quilts. When Diana joined the royal family in 1981—her wedding took place just weeks after the first published report about AIDS—I had little time for the monarchy. It was not a good moment to be a gay man in London. Little did I know what Diana would evolve into.

In 1982 British activists set about creating the Terrence Higgins Trust, modeling it after New York City's Gay Men's Health Crisis. We began to look for royal support; none was forthcoming. Their first intervention came from Diana's sister-in-law Princess Anne, whose deeply disturbing comment was that AIDS was "humanity's own goal"—a twist on a typical English expression about a team scoring a goal in its own net. The implication: Our own behavior had brought AIDS down upon us.

Princess Anne's incomprehension of AIDS reflected that of President Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Diana, though, had friends who were becoming ill. She instinctively knew she could make a difference, and she —first through individual acts of friendship and kindness, then through very public demonstrations of concern. In time, she also enlisted others in her outreach-such as when she took Barbara Bush to visit children with AIDS in a British hospice.

In 1990, Diana made one of her many private visits to a London AIDS ward. There she met Charlie, an angry and difficult friend of mine. She spent a long time with him, listening and talking.

Afterward, Charlie was transformed, calm and content. His photograph of them together was his proudest possession for the rest of his short life. Very simply, Diana had eased his anger; Charlie had rediscovered his own value through her personal interest. Before he died, Charlie said the memory of her visit had helped keep him alive. This rare and special gift is Diana's legacy.

One phrase I have heard over and over again since the Princess' death is "I never thought this would upset me so much." The extraordinary public response no longer surprises me. Her openness about the difficulties in her own life—from the divorce of her parents through her own unhappy marriage to her battle with bulimia—expressed so much of our generation's experience, one that found little voice in the Reagan/Thatcher years. (That it should finally be revealed through a person of extreme privilege is ironic.)

The last five years of Diana's life are metaphors for the trials and victories of PWAs: She had taken on a family of rich bullies and won, put her in-laws in their place and quit her marriage with a huge settlement and no loss of power.

She moved with grace through all spheres of society, talking as easily with the dispossessed as with heads of state. And she was developing an international ambassadorial role while finding the love of a handsome playboy millionaire. Diana touched the lives of millions around the world. What the future may have held we will never knew, but the memory of her is something I cherish.

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