Remembering 18 HIV Leaders We Lost in 2020 [SLIDESHOW]

Too many HIV advocates and leaders died of COVID-19, but the pandemic notwithstanding, 2020 took several AIDS icons.

December 30, 2020 By Trent Straube

By any measure, 2020 was a rough year. Amid escalating political, racial and economic turmoil, the COVID-19 pandemic struck; thus far, it has claimed the lives of over 340,000 Americans.

Countless members of the HIV community have been lost to the novel coronavirus. This is unsurprising because data show that the populations at highest risk for severe illness and death are people of color, older people, those with other health conditions and people with compromised immune systems. This means that COVID-19 often strikes at the heart of the HIV community, notably its elders and leaders. (About half of the people living with HIV in the United States are 50 or older; that figure is predicted to reach 70% within a decade.)

COVID-19 revealed its toll on the HIV community early in the year; the June issue of POZ included a spread dedicated to seven AIDS leaders who died of complications from the new coronavirus (they're included in the list below). But coronavirus aside, 2020 was a devastating year for the HIV community, which said goodbye to many beloved and fearless advocates, researchers and friends.



Microbiologist and HIV researcher Frank Plummer, MDCourtesy of University of Manitoba, Canada

Below is a roundup of obituaries highlighted throughout the year, listed in chronological order; click on the person's name to be linked to the original write-up. Photos are included in the slideshow above. Sadly, this is not a definitive list. Certainly, there are many others we didn't know about. Please visit the comments section to memorialize anyone you knew who died this year.

Frank Plummer

This microbiologist was a leading HIV, SARS, Ebola and H1N1 flu researcher. In recent years, he made headlines as a willing guinea pig who underwent an experimental brain surgery to treat his alcohol addiction. He was 67 and died February 4 of a heart attack.

Terrence McNally

One of Broadway's great playwrights, he penned the 1994 AIDS play Love! Valour! Compassion!, which won a Tony Award for Best Play, among many other hits. McNally was also a founder of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, which raises funds for HIV causes. He was 81 and died of complications from COVID-19.

Lorena Borjas

This beloved Latinx transgender activist ran HIV testing programs and syringe exchanges for people taking hormones. A beloved New Yorker, she took her advocacy to the streets, helping change police policies toward trans people and sex workers. She was 60 and died of complications from COVID-19.

Gita Ramjee, PhD

A true global leader, she grew up in Uganda and India but also lived in the United Kingdom and South Africa. Ramjee earned her PhD in pediatrics and was passionate about HIV prevention for women and girls and worked to expand access to treatment. She was 63 and died March 31 of complications from COVID-19.

Garry Bowie

As an HIV activist and nonprofit leader, he most recently oversaw the West Hollywood AIDS group Being Alive. He was 59 and died April 7 of complications from COVID-19.

Deloris Dockrey

HIV positive since 1994, she was a fighter for other women living with HIV and worked at the Hyacinth Clinic in Newark, for 15 years. She died April 27 of complications from COVID-19.

Ed Shaw

A longtime activist who lived with HIV for slightly over 30 years, he advocated for those aging with HIV. He was in his late 70s and died of complications from COVID-19.

August “Buzz” Pusateri

HIV positive since at least 1982 and a longtime LGBT trailblazer, he participated in the Pitt Men’s Study, a long-running AIDS research project. He was 81 and died May 4; no cause of death was cited.

Nita Pippins

She moved to New York in 1987 to care for a dying son. She remained in Manhattan and devoted herself to providing care and guidance for others in the same situation, helping to found Miracle House and becoming a mother to many dealing with AIDS. She was 93 and died on Mother’s Day of complications from COVID-19.

Larry Kramer

The author, advocate and cofounder of GMHC and ACT UP was an icon for the HIV community. A long-term survivor, he was a frequent POZ magazine cover subject and appeared once again in 2020 in an issue dedicated to his legacy. POZ founder Sean Strub penned the cover story, “Remembering the Passion of Larry Kramer,” while POZ Spotlight rounded up a collection of social media posts by fellow activists and celebrities responding to his death, and a POZ Planet column titled “Pages of Larry Kramer” explored the author’s essays, plays, books and films, notably Faggots and The Normal Heart. Kramer died May 27 of pneumonia at age 84 after several health challenges.

Ron Simmons, PhD

As a community leader and academic, he empowered gay Black men and led the DC-based HIV nonprofit Us Helping Us. He died May 28 at age 70. The cause of death was prostate cancer.

Flossie Wong-Staal, PhD

As a molecular biologist, she made pivotal HIV discoveries. Notably, she was the first to clone HIV

and helped prove that the virus causes AIDS. She was also known for her research in cancer genetics. She died July 8 at age 73 of pneumonia unrelated to coronavirus.

Peter Stinner

For over two decades this HIV educator and ACT UP activist helped thousands of clients at Grady Health System's Ponce de Leon Center in Atlanta. He was 55 and died August 16 of a heart attack.

Elizabeth Owens

A former heroin user who once lived on the streets, she transformed into a VOCAL-NY activist and "Force of Joy" who championed New Yorkers affected by housing insecurity, drugs, HIV and hepatitis. Her age and cause of death were not cited.

Leanza Cornett

She commanded the national spotlight as Miss America 1993, a talented and brave beauty who was unafraid of controversy and spoke publicly about HIV and safe sex. She died October 28 after suffering a head injury during a fall. She was 49.

Frederick Weston

The brilliant artist, poet and performer explored Black queerness in his work and was also an active member of the Visual AIDS family. He died October 21 at age 73 of complications from bladder cancer.

Joyce Wallace, MD

One of the first doctors in New York City to care for people who had AIDS, she is also remembered as a champion of female sex workers. She died October 14 of a heart attack. She was 79.

Timothy Ray Brown

Famous for being the first man cured of HIV, he was known for many years as the Berlin Patient to protect his anonymity. Brown tested HIV positive in 1995 and was diagnosed with unrelated leukemia in 2006. A rare bone marrow transplant to treat his cancer also cured his HIV by 2008. Three years later, he went public, inspiring many in the community. You can read numerous appreciations on social media; several posts are collected in this POZ Spotlight. He was 54 and died September 29 after battling a recurrence of leukemia.

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