R.I.P. Mark Milano, a Fierce and Tireless HIV Activist and Treatment Educator

Living with HIV since 1981, Mark Milano fought for LGBTQ and AIDS issues. His radical activism helped shape global and national policies.

January 16, 2026 By Kate Ferguson

A relentless activist, dedicated HIV treatment educator and POZ 100 honoree (and longtime contributor to the magazine), Mark Milano died January 3, 2026, in New York City. The cause of death was complications of cancer, according to an obituary posted on EverLoved.com. He was 69. Born on April 28, 1956, in Milwaukee, Milano contracted HIV in 1981 and was formally diagnosed in 1985, the year that the first blood tests came out, making him one of the longest-known long-term survivors.

Milano participated in countless actions and HIV organizations—including ACT UP New York, Health GAP, Gays Against Guns and alternative Pride marches—and his work spanned four decades in both Chicago and New York. Just last year shortly after undergoing surgery, Milano shared a picture of him with with his life partner, Gerry Valero, at a Hands Off Medicare march. “Still recovering from my kidney transplant,” Milano wrote in an April 5 post on Facebook, “so we only made it six blocks, but I was there.”

Milano was a self-described force of nature whose true joy stemmed from living his life for a mighty purpose. In the late 1980s, while living in Chicago, he became extremely ill. He vowed that if he lived, he’d move to New York and devote his life to activism and helping others. He did exactly that and became an expert on HIV science and research, recalled Asia Russell, the executive director of Health GAP, in a memorial published in Gay City News.

“Through his radical activism, Mark shaped global and domestic HIV policies and held powerful officials to account for their deeds,” wrote Russell. “He carried out countless acts of brave and meaningful civil disobedience during inflection points in the AIDS crisis, from disrupting Trump’s first inaugural address…to confronting the deadly greed of pharmaceutical executives obstructing widespread access to the first powerful combination antiretrovirals. He stubbornly put his body on the line over and over, in service of a vision of ending the AIDS crisis. Beyond HIV, he confronted evil and wrongdoing wherever he found it.”

Milano was an honoree of the 2015 POZ 100, which celebrated long-term survivors. In the issue,

he spoke to POZ about the kind of heart it takes to do HIV advocacy work. “Progress never comes without struggle. We need to put our bodies on the line if we are to change the system,” he said, urging, in the next breath, that people also must practice self-care. “I’ve had to take breaks in order to keep my sanity.”

The write-up about Milano in the 2015 POZ 100 read:

> Mark knows the challenges of aging with HIV. When he was diagnosed [as having AIDS] in 1982, there were no effective treatments, and he had to work hard to stay healthy. Today, though he has his HIV under control, his comorbidities present new challenges. He has worked at ACRIA since 2001, and he is a member of ACT UP New York, Health GAP and the AIDS Treatment Activists Coalition. He is devoted to ensuring people living with HIV are afforded the best treatment and care, and he feels a strong need to share what he has learned over the past 34 years. At his Living with HIV workshops at ACRIA, he teaches younger generations critical medical information—and that gives him strength to carry on.

In 1995 while in ACT UP, he wrote an opinion piece for POZ titled “Why Not a Cure?” in which he called for “a coordinated all-out effort to cure AIDS.” And in a 2005 article, he credited taking a low-dose of the steroid prednisone with keeping him alive all those early years.

As time marched on, however, HIV comorbidities challenged him. Milano dealt with metastasized anal cancer, high blood pressure, a heart condition known as tachycardia, kidney damage, erectile dysfunction, peripheral neuropathy and gastroesophageal reflux disease—which he listed in a 2015 POZ opinion piece titled “Living & Aging with HIV: What We Need to Do.”

Milano shared details about his journey to self-empowerment with his characteristic humor and candor. Along the way, he added memberships with Health GAP and the AIDS Treatment Activists Coalition to his advocacy affiliations. In 2001, he went to work for ACRIA, where he led HIV workshops to educate young people about the virus and help them manage the numerous conditions they faced.

“In my work as an HIV treatment educator and counselor, I’m constantly reminded how critical personal empowerment is in battling this disease,” wrote Milano in a 2014 POZ article. “I’ve seen clients go from being in a state of denial to being full-fledged advocates for themselves and others. It’s critical that we continue this work to ensure that all older adults with HIV get the care they need.”

In 2020, Milano won a judgment against a cosmetic surgeon who not only had refused to treat people with HIV but had also tested patients without their consent, POZ reported. A New York Supreme Court justice ruled that the cosmetic surgeon had to pay Milano and two other plaintiffs $125,000 each in damages for refusing to perform breast reduction surgery on them because they had HIV.

Seventeen years before his lawsuit victory, Milano appeared in an interview discussing his work as an ACT UP activist in an unedited video posted on the UCLA Film & Television Archive Library's website (you can also watch it above).

Activism defined Milano's life and taught him that people can change the world through the strength of their commitment to a cause. "It's just a matter of having the will to make it happen," Milano said, according to his online obit.

Russell ended her remembrance with an announcement that Health GAP planned a celebration of Milano's life and achievements with an award in early 2026. "Watch this space for details," she said.

"We love you Mark and we will keep fighting on in your name," Russell wrote.

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