Searching for ACT UP

This excerpt from Peter Staley's memoir, *Never Silent: ACT UP and My Life in Activism*, takes place as aids activism blossoms.

February 14, 2022 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 (KS), 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, 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.

After consulting with my brother Jes, 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 down-sizing 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 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. 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?"

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 being called "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.

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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.

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.

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

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