Don’t Shoot the Messenger

In this essay, a long-term HIV survivor links past AIDS activism to current efforts to prevent gun violence.

May 14, 2018 By Jay W. Walker

On February 14, 2017, at locations around New York City, Gays Against Guns (GAG) performed a piece of street theater titled My Bloody Valentine that called attention to the toxic love affair between the National Rifle Association (NRA) and Donald Trump. The NRA had donated $30 million to elect the president, and GAG was not having it.

The Valentine’s Day piece was wild and theatrical. It included a fabulously draggy “Cheetolina” Trump stand-in; an equally fabulous drag king cross between a carnival barker and Dick Dastardly of the Wacky Races animated series standing in for the NRA’s executive vice president, Wayne LaPierre; and a lot of fake cash.

It was accompanied by members of our “queertet,” GAG Reflex, singing “My Bloody Valentine,” a rewritten version of the standard “My Funny Valentine,” and a pair of “Human Beings” representing gay partners whose love story had been cut short by the 2016 massacre at the gay nightclub Pulse in Orlando, Florida.

In February 2018, 11 members of GAG traveled to Washington, DC, to join an equal number of members of GAG’s DC chapter and their supporters to call attention to our ongoing campaign against the “Concealed Carry Reciprocity” bill that had passed in the House of Representatives and was being sponsored in the Senate by John Cornyn, a Texas Republican who’s also the majority whip.

We took a simplified version of the “My Bloody Valentine” show to Senator Cornyn. We delivered an oversize “bloody” valentine to his office, but during the performance part of the day in the Hart Building’s ground-floor atrium, the planned arrests of six of our members occurred before we ever got to sing. But we made our point.

As we finished, one of the few journalists covering our protest showed me a news story on his smartphone—there was an ongoing mass-shooting situation at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. It had begun at almost the exact moment we had entered Cornyn’s office.

Courtesy of Gays Against Guns

After our arrestees had paid their $50 post-and-forfeit fines (a process allowing folks to pay and simultaneously forfeit a cash payment in exchange for resolution of a misdemeanor charge), we returned to Union Station and had a final few moments with our GAG DC comrades before boarding the bus back to New York.

Normally, after an action like this, we GAGers are a little exultant and giddy. This time, however, the horrific Parkland massacre cast a pall over us. Our work for the day was not finished. We shifted into hyper-GAG mode.

We gathered all the available information on the events in Parkland. A press release was obviously necessary. We absolutely had to plan something on the streets of New York the next day, but where and when?

By the time our five-hour return trip was over, we had finished the first draft of the press release and solidified our plan for a rally at LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts to be followed by a procession to Lincoln Center, where NRA funder Charles Koch had a theater named after him.

We had also reached out to our most staunch allies among city and state elected officials, contacted other gun violence prevention (GVP) organizations to cosponsor the action (in the end they wouldn't, though a few sent speakers), worked out who our own speakers would be, promoted the action on social media and composed an e-blast to our membership.

This wasn't our first time at this rodeo. Four and a half months earlier, on a Sunday evening, a lone gunman had opened fire at a concert in Las Vegas, killing 59 people and injuring over 800,

supplanting the massacre at Pulse as the deadliest single-actor mass shooting in U.S. history. By that Monday night, we had assembled a crowd of hundreds at Union Square for a rally, followed by a march to Times Square.

Sadly, we now had a formula for such situations. In the 20 months—almost to the day—since the carnage at Pulse, we had learned a lot. How had we learned it? To understand what forces motivate us—and me—we must go back a bit.

Courtesy of Gays Against Guns

The Pulse shooting happened on June 12, 2016. I remember that time because my own health was on an upswing after nearly a year of HIV-related problems.

In June 2016, I had been HIV positive for 20 years. At the time of my diagnosis, I worked at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and had health insurance, so I started HIV meds. But when I left that job and became an independent contractor, I lost my insurance. This was before the Affordable Care Act (ACA), and my preexisting condition forestalled any chance I had to attain insurance on the open market. What's more, my income was too high for me to qualify for Medicaid or an AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP). I was screwed.

I did what I could to be as healthy as possible: cleanses, home remedies when I felt anything wrong, improving my diet, etc. That worked for about eight years. I felt better than I had in all the years since I had begun treatment.

The ACA became law years after I had gone off meds, but I didn't sign up because my income was seasonally uneven. Spring and summer were lucrative, but fall and winter were not. ACA enrollment took place in the fall and winter. As long as I felt OK off meds, I didn't think this was a problem.

However, in August 2015 that all started to unravel. I recognized the way my body felt—the fatigue, the loss of appetite, the inability to concentrate at work—but I didn't want to admit to myself that the jig was up. Now that my HIV was resurgent, I needed to get back on treatment. But how?

In a few months, I was no longer capable of working, which helped sort that all out. I had become destitute, so I was eligible for a public health plan. By late winter 2015, I was on newer meds (a huge improvement from my earlier regimen); by June 2016, I was feeling myself again. And then Pulse happened.

Courtesy of Gays Against Guns

Before I went to bed late that Saturday night, I saw something about a shooting at a nightclub in Florida but didn't pay it much attention. On Sunday morning, I was awakened by a phone call from a friend asking whether I'd heard the news.

After the call, I began consuming every bit of information I could find on cable news, the network morning news shows and the internet. 49 dead? Over 50 injured? The most murderous single mass shooting in history? And it was directed at LGBTQ people? I began posting about it on the one social media platform I used regularly: Facebook.

I hadn't been an activist for years. About a year after my HIV diagnosis in December 1996, I began participating in HIV/AIDS activism through GMHC's public policy department. I was also working for AIDS Walk New York.

A couple of years later, I began working directly for GMHC in the development department, eventually managing the special events unit for five years. My time there saw a thawing in the contentious relationship between the agency and cofounder Larry Kramer, who had left the organization stormily in the 1980s to cofound ACT UP.

I had never been a part of ACT UP (one of my great regrets), but I had always respected Kramer and ACT UP's work. How could I not, knowing how directly their work had led to speeding research into AIDS drugs and the federal approval process for new meds.

My late partner had been in an early clinical trial for protease inhibitors, and they had brought him back from the brink of death. ACT UP's work—the pressure the group put on the federal government, the pharmaceutical industry and the medical establishment—had saved his life then and was saving mine now.

A couple of days after the shooting at Pulse, a friend and former GMHC board member invited me to a meeting at the LGBT Community Center to respond to the massacre. I decided to attend. On that Thursday, June 16, 2016, Gays Against Guns was born.

When I entered the room, I expected to see a few people I knew or at least recognized. I saw Duncan Osborne from Gay City News. There was a seat next to him, so I sat there. Soon, I heard a British-accented voice from behind me say, "Is that Jay?!" I turned to see my old friend from the AIDS Walk New York '98 campaign, Amanda Lugg.

As I looked around at the 100 or so folks in the room, I saw more people I knew from the October 19th Coalition, a short-lived group I helped found in the fall of '98 after the death of Matthew Shepard. That group focused on hate crimes against LGBTQ people, and all our meetings had been held at the LGBT center. I had come home.

Courtesy of Gays Against Guns

From the start of that Gays Against Guns meeting, the tactics and lessons of ACT UP were in the air. Gun violence had long been a crisis in our nation, but now it had come for the queer community. We were not going to have this attack on us in one of our safe spaces—a gay club—go unmet. The history of ACT UP offered strategies that we could employ.

The fabulous Kevin Hertzog led the meeting, striking vogueing poses throughout. With his co-initiators, Brian Worth and John Grauwiler, by his side, he led us in a lively discussion of what this group of people could do to take a stand against the pervasiveness of gun culture and the seeming inability of the authorities charged with protecting us all to respond in any meaningful or lasting manner.

Many ACT UP veterans were in the room, and, as we discussed tactics, the conversation kept returning to triumphs of public attention that ACT UP had achieved: the giant condom over Senator Jesse Helms's house, the St. Patrick's Cathedral protest, the New York Stock Exchange protest and all the arrests for civil disobedience.

Those protests gave us our template. We would be brash, showy, theatrical. We would be incredibly gay. We would be an amazing presence at the Pride March, which at that point was just 10 days away, exactly two weeks after the Pulse bloodbath.

Our greatest obstacle to that happening, the fact that Pride registration had closed over a month earlier, melted away when openly gay and HIV-positive New York City Councilmember Corey Johnson (who is now the City Council speaker), without a second thought, gave us his contingent's spot in the march.

Over the next week, more meetings were held, and those of us who felt we could commit to hands-on organizing stepped forward. I volunteered to take the lead in logistics.

Clothing designer Mari Gustafson—known now and forever as GAG-Hag—would come up with the stencil design that would become our logo and set up a T-shirt spray-painting and poster-making party at the East Village bar Lucky, where we would hone our brash aesthetic on the Saturday before the Pride March.

Between that first meeting and Sunday, June 26, the day of the Pride March, we had grown to over 1,000 marchers, chief among them the 49 Human Beings representing those lost at Pulse. They were veiled and dressed formally in all white. Some carried white lace parasols or other props and were led by a Human Being holding a giant disco ball aloft on a pole.

The Human Beings were conceived by the astoundingly creative burlesque artist James “Tigger!” Ferguson and brought to glorious, if heartbreaking, fruition at Pride. This was our way of honoring the 49 dead at Pulse. This was also our way to get attention, ACT UP style.

The next day, the Human Beings were on page 1 above the fold in The New York Times. A new chapter in the gun violence prevention movement had begun, a very gay chapter. And we owed its genesis to ACT UP.

We would cleave to that model as we grew. Cathy Marino-Thomas, a GAG member since the first meeting who had been the chair of Marriage Equality New York for over 15 years, would bring to bear her extraordinary grassroots organizing skills and whip us into an actual functional organization with long-term viability.

A week after Pride, we were on Fire Island leading a procession of Human Beings across the beach from the Pines to Cherry Grove, two predominantly gay areas, handing out flyers about who we were and how others could join us.

Meanwhile, journalist and author Tim Murphy (who is also a POZ contributing writer) was cajoling donations at the dock in the Pines. Videographers Tanya Selvaratnam and Paul Rowley had joined us to interview our members and film our procession, launching what would become our ongoing video documentation project, GAGReel.

The next day, we were at an Independence Day Parade in Patchogue, New York, protesting Congressman Lee Zeldin—someone we considered to be an NRA puppet and whose district encompasses Fire Island—with an actual puppet representing him. We dogged other politicians in our area who were beholden to the NRA's campaign contributions as well.

We made a big splash at the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade with members dressed as congressional zombies lured by the delicious scent of the NRA campaign cash dangling before them.

Soon after, Mark Leydorf, a GAG member and an accomplished off-Broadway lyricist, came up with the idea of rewriting holiday standards with anti–gun violence lyrics and GAGNog was born. (By that year's holiday season, the election had necessitated the addition of anti-Trump lyrics.)

GAGNog was renamed GAGReflex after the holidays when Mark added rewritten patriotic and general standards to our repertoire for our return to DC for the Women's March. We garnered more press coverage, and, under the leadership of Murphy, who headed up our media outreach efforts, we became more confident in our dealings with the fourth estate.

People nationwide began contacting us to form GAG chapters in their cities. Many of those chapters, like GAG DC, are still going strong. In the summer of 2017, we launched our boldest action plan to date: taking our message directly to gun shows, our Human Beings right along with us. It was a first for the gun violence prevention (GVP) movement.

We have earned the respect of long-standing GVP organizations, though our tactics are sometimes a tad beyond the pale for some of their sensibilities. But we were the first direct action GVP group, so that was to be expected.

And those other organizations would simply have to get used to us, as would the press, the politicians and the public. The most important lesson we had learned from ACT UP was that

playing respectability politics must take a back seat to saving lives.

Jay W. Walker is a founding member of and organizer for Gays Against Guns. He also organizes for the direct action group Rise and Resist.

For more images, click the gallery below.

Courtesy of Gays Against Guns and @Spencerschutte