Telling Their Stories

Children who lost parents to AIDS are finding community in a group called the Recollectors.

May 8, 2015 By Trent Straube

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The story of the Recollectors begins about 14 years ago at a bar in New York. Whitney Joiner, a journalist then in her early 20s, was having drinks with colleagues when she mentioned that her dad had died of AIDS complications. “Oh,” one of them responded, “my girlfriend’s father died of AIDS too.”

A simple enough statement, but one of exceptional weight. Though Joiner knew there had to be others like herself, she had never met any of them. Soon, Joiner and the girlfriend, Alysia Abbott, met up for lunch. Turns out, both their fathers were gay and died in 1992. Unlike Joiner’s dad, who was divorced from his wife and closeted to his two children in suburban Kentucky, Abbott’s father had been out and proud; after his wife died in a car wreck when Abbott was very young, he and his only child moved to San Francisco, where they became immersed in the bohemian Haight-Ashbury scene of the 1970s.

After their lunch, the two remained in touch, but life moved on. Abbott and that co-worker got married and had children; Joiner moved to Texas, then returned to New York City. As the 20th anniversary of their fathers’ deaths approached, the two women talked more frequently, spurred by Abbott’s work on her now-published book, Fairyland: A Memoir of My Father.

“We thought, ‘It’s been a while now; why don’t we know more people like us?’” Joiner recalls. Soon, the idea for a project emerged: Why not start a group, or publish an anthology and set up a website to do outreach and collect stories?

Then in February 2014, Abbott participated in a panel discussion titled “The Personal and the Political: Losing Parents to AIDS” that was sponsored by the New York Public Library and Visual AIDS. The program’s promotional material summed up the need for what became the Recollectors: “The amount of people whose parents died of AIDS may number in the hundreds of thousands nationally, and in the tens of thousands in New York City. Yet they have never been heard from as a community.... This event is to start this conversation. What are the experiences of people whose parents died of AIDS? How do they understand these experiences? What do they need?”

It was a pivotal event for Abbott, inspiring her to more advocacy and connecting her with other survivors. Meanwhile, the project she and Joiner envisioned was moving forward, thanks to funding from a successful Kickstarter campaign, and in October 2014, TheRecollectors.com—“a storytelling site and community for the many children and families left behind by parents who died of AIDS”—was born.

From left: Whitney Joiner and Alysia AbbottBill Wadman

Indeed the website does serve as a digital anthology.

Each story by a Recollector—the pronunciation stems from the verb “recollect,” as in “to

remember”—is uniquely compelling and heartbreaking (for brief samples, see the sidebar at the end of this feature). Many are told as first-person accounts, either edited by Joiner or Abbott, or excerpted from memoirs. In addition, the site offers oral histories, Q&As, resources and family photos.

The group also maintains two Facebook pages: a private one where members can converse candidly, and a public one for posts to share openly. About 120 Recollectors are members of the Facebook page, but others are active in different ways. Their ages range from mid-50s to early 20s. They span the country—with a few international members—and although a great number of them lost gay dads, the group, like the epidemic itself, spans races, genders, sexual orientations and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some are also HIV positive. “What’s important,” Abbott says, “is that the content represent the diversity of the Recollector experience. We’re reaching out to Recollectors who are African American, Latino, those whose parents were drug addicts. We want to welcome those members without judgment.”

The way the group works, Joiner explains, is that someone will contact them—“I’m one of you!”—and then get directed to the private page. After a while, if they’re comfortable with it, she and Abbott help them craft stories for the website.

Not everyone is comfortable with that. Others are pressured to remain silent—like the Recollector whose family member is running for public office, or the one who wants to share reminiscences of his beloved father, but the circumstances of his death—the family’s church refused to bury him because he had AIDS—remain deeply upsetting to his mother.

“What we’re finding,” Abbott says, “is that there are a lot of never-healed wounds. It was such a painful experience because there was so much shame and secrecy around it. There was a lot of, ‘Let’s put this away and not talk about it anymore.’ So it was never processed.”

To confound the situation, Abbott says, many Recollectors were young as they watched their parent die; they were often told what to do and say, and today, with the insight that comes with maturing, they carry regrets about the way things happened.

The Recollectors group offers a space to heal. “There is something powerful about being an adult and telling the story,” Abbott says. “It’s an active process instead of a passive one.” As such, it can even be viewed as a form of activism through storytelling.

Joiner experienced this firsthand. She had not spoken about her dad with many people, but as the Recollectors campaign kicked off, she realized she had to lead by example. “I was really scared and nervous about it,” she recalls. “It’s a story you carried with you your whole life and you want to tell it in the right way, but then I faced a deadline and it was like, I just have to put it out there for the greater good.”

She benefited from the process on a personal level too: She’s now closer to her brother and mom.

“Not that we spend much time talking about it now,” she clarifies, “but it used to feel like there was this elephant in the room. I guess I didn’t realize how isolated I felt until I heard all the other stories, but now everything feels more integrated.” What’s more, she adds, “sometimes I felt close to my father, sometimes not. But now he’s close all the time, and that’s nice.”

“I’ve seen that sharing stories can be a healing process,” says Reed Vreeland, a Recollector who lost his mother to the virus and was himself born with HIV. “I’m able to share my story now, not just to heal myself but to reach out and be there for other people coming out of the pain of their experiences.”

Today, Vreeland is the director of policy at Housing Works, which fights HIV and homelessness (he has also worked at POZ). But like many Recollectors, he wasn’t always so open about HIV. He tells of going to high school in New York City with Sara Rafsky—the two even had a class together—but neither knew the other had any connection with AIDS. It wasn’t until adulthood that the two reconnected and he realized her deceased father was Bob Rafsky, a prominent activist featured in the documentary How to Survive a Plague.

“One reason I wanted to join the Recollectors,” Vreeland says, “was because of the sense of isolation I felt growing up. While my family was supportive, my father is not HIV positive and I knew few people who had common experiences. With Recollectors, we have a connection that would be difficult to have under normal circumstances.”

In fact, the “Oh, that happened to me too!” moments have been huge for Recollectors, says Abbott, noting as an example members’ conflicted thoughts about World AIDS Day.

Similarly, Vreeland says, the Recollectors offers a place to mourn and celebrate lost parents. “It’s a beautiful way to bring them back into our lives, not from a place of pain and isolation but from a place of community and healing.”

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Many Recollectors share a strong connection with the LGBT community. After Stefan Lynch lost his gay father and step-dad, he remained active in the queer community for years by becoming the director of what’s now COLAGE, a group for children of LGBT parents.

“The Recollectors feels very much like early COLAGE conferences,” he says, “except with social media instead of hotel ballrooms. Even though I’m not having the ‘I’m not alone!’ feelings that many are, the Recollectors stories are gripping because they take me back to the time I was a teenager in the middle of a plague that was killing my family while my peers worried about the right haircuts and curfews.”

Other Recollectors have a more fraught relationship with today’s gay scene. “The specter of AIDS speaks to an era when gay meant being on the outside and dangerous,” Abbott explains. “People

who came of age later want to distance themselves from that because it's not a TV-friendly picture of being gay." This leaves some Recollectors feeling out of sync with both the straight world and the LGBT community.

Of course, being gay or dying of AIDS "doesn't make someone a saint," as Abbott puts it. "But we still want to tell those stories." And they do, as in the excerpt from Victoria Loustalot's memoir This Is How You Say Goodbye: A Daughter's Memoir, in which she grapples with the fact that her HIV-positive father refused to go with her mother to get tested. "I try to understand that he married because he felt that he had to," she writes. "He was raised in a different time in a conservative pocket of a liberal state. His parents were strict. I try to understand…. But still. To not think at all of my mother and to refuse to support her. To be so unfeeling. How can I be proud to call such a man my father?"

This story, too, helps fill in missing chapters of AIDS history—as will future Recollector stories and projects. Abbott and Joiner already envision face-to-face meet-ups, public events, paid staff and audio recordings, and the two are always on the lookout for other Recollectors.

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For Gillian Bannon, discovering the Recollectors has been nothing short of life-altering. "Other than the birth of my son, this is the most amazing thing that has happened to me since my dad's death," she says. Bannon was very close with her father, Larry W. Mahon, whom she describes as a "super creative" leather man very active in San Diego's gay scene. In her early 20s, she even got an apartment near his. "I idolized him," she says, "and he totally understood me. Dad was like Peter Pan—he never grew up—and I loved it." His death in 1994, and the loss of most of his friends, was devastating to Bannon.

In early 2014, she came across Abbott's Fairyland and the two connected online. "Before last year, it was a lonely existence," Bannon says. Then she joined the Recollectors. "I feel like I've been given a secret key to the safest playground on earth," she says. "No bullies, no bigots. Just open acceptance."

At first she was reluctant to post on the public Facebook page—"I had dreams I would lose my job," she says—but when she gave it a try, the items garnered more Likes than her other posts. Emboldened, she's now becoming an advocate, speaking publicly about her experiences.

Before the Recollectors, she says, "I was never able to watch Philadelphia or any [AIDS] movies. But now I watched The Normal Heart and How to Survive a Plague—I couldn't believe I didn't know about dumping ashes on the White House lawn," she adds, referencing ACT UP's 1992 action when members dumped the cremated remains of loved ones on the lawn to protest government indifference.

"This year has been an awakening for me," Bannon continues. "It's been food for my soul. I feel

better, more confident. And it’s making me reflect on who I want to be.” It’s also inspiring her to work on her own memoir.

Meanwhile, Abbott’s book is about to reach a much wider audience. She recently had dinner with Sofia Coppola—yes, the Oscar winner—who is producing a film version of Fairyland. Coppola is working on the script with Andrew Durham, who will direct and who also, it turns out, is a fellow Recollector. During the meeting, Coppola mentioned that fashion icon Tina Chow, who died of AIDS complications in 1992, had two children.

“I want to find them,” Abbott says today. “There are just so many stories—and they’re all so very powerful.”

To connect with the group, email info@therecollectors.com, or visit therecollectors.com or facebook.com/therecollectors.org.

Recollections
Each story of a parent lost to AIDS offers a uniquely informative and gripping piece of history. Most of the very brief, edited examples below are taken from TheRecollectors.com.

S.E., 9, with her mother and baby brother, 1991.Courtesy of The Recollectors

S.E., 9, with her mother and baby brother, 1991. In an oral history as told to Whitney Joiner, S.E. says: “It’s now been over 14 years since [my mom] died, and it’s taken me that long to fully acknowledge her death. But I have a grown daughter now, and I’ve let go of that anger. I can’t imagine what my mother went through. Her only crime was that she fell in love with a man who was infected.”

2) Crystal Gamet with her mother, Deborah Kellner Arnett, 1986.Courtesy of The Recollectors

Crystal Gamet with her mother, Deborah Kellner Arnett, 1986. Gamet offers a loving homage to her mother, who was illiterate and lived in the Allegheny Mountains of rural Pennsylvania. “My mom never knew that she could have lived a long life. That led to her dying, I think. When I later watched How to Survive a Plague, I wished my mom had known about that kind of stuff, that she just had community so that she didn’t have to feel less than human. I think she didn’t actually know you don’t have to die. She died in 2004”—almost a decade after the advent of lifesaving HIV meds.

Reed Vreeland and his mother, Sandra, 1989.Courtesy of The Recollectors

Reed Vreeland and his mother, Sandra, 1989. Vreeland was born with HIV. “Knowing I had the

same thing that I was watching her die of, that was hard to grapple with," he tells POZ. "I felt isolated. But sharing the stories has been a healing process for Recollectors."

Stefan Lynch and his father, Michael, 1986.Courtesy of The Recollectors

Stefan Lynch and his father, Michael, 1986. Lynch says that growing up with his dad and "the Aunties" in Toronto's gay activist culture taught him "how to really have fun, even when life is not easy and even when people are dying."

Sara Rafsky with her dad, Bob, 1987.Courtesy of The Recollectors

Sara Rafsky with her dad, Bob, 1987. Rafsky's father is featured in the ACT UP documentary How to Survive a Plague. The film's 2012 debut at Sundance, she says, marked "a transformation" in her life. "This was not something I discussed openly, not with friends, family, anyone—and then, overnight, I'm doing Q&As in front of hundreds of strangers."

Viviana Maldonado and her father, Jose, 1998.Courtesy of The Recollectors

Viviana Maldonado and her father, Jose, 1998. A Mexican immigrant, her dad was an Evangelical preacher in Nebraska, ministering to Latino workers when he was diagnosed with AIDS. “I was always thinking, When is this going to blow up?” she says, expecting to be bullied and shunned. “What happened was incredible: Everyone was supportive. My father was really loved in the community.”

Jason Schmidt and his father, Mark, 1980 or ’81.Courtesy of The Recollectors

Jason Schmidt and his father, Mark, 1980 or ’81. In an excerpt from his memoir A List of Things That Didn’t Kill Me, Schmidt tries to deal with his dad’s way of life. “They say there’s no zealot like a convert,” he writes, “and Dad was definitely a convert; having grown up in the closet, he’d found his full gay self in Seattle at the age of thirty. And thirty-two-year-old gay Dad was pissed off about

all those wasted years of having sex with women just to impress other people with how straight he was. Thirty-two-year-old gay Dad was pissed about a lot of things."

Gillian Bannon with her father, Larry W. Mahon, 1989.Courtesy of The Recollectors

Gillian Bannon with her father, Larry W. Mahon, 1989. "My dad was a leather man, super creative, very openly gay," Bannon tells POZ. "I idolized him, and he understood me." Losing him and his gay friends left Bannon feeling lonely. Discovering the Recollectors, she says, "feels like I've been given the keys to the safest playground on earth. I get to talk about my dad, and I don't have to worry about anything I say. It's open acceptance. It has been amazing."

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