



Managing AIDS Grief in the 1980s... by Making Silly Videos

May 30, 2024 By [Mark S. King](#)

This is a story about how the staff at the very first HIV/AIDS agency in Los Angeles managed to handle the stress of that time without falling apart – and a random, whimsical twist of fate that followed many years later.

My first job in the AIDS arena was at the Los Angeles Shanti Foundation. It was 1987, I was 26 years old and HIV positive, and I figured it was the last job I would ever have. I have written often about [those brutal years](#) and the work of L.A. Shanti, but suffice it to say that its mission to provide emotional support to those with HIV/AIDS was critically important and emotionally exhausting. Clients often died days or weeks after being assigned a Shanti emotional support volunteer.

To fight the stress, we started an agency tradition called “Bad Shanti.” Once a month we would shut down the office, send the phones to voicemail, and get the hell out. We would go play putt-putt golf together, or catch the latest Disney movie on Hollywood Boulevard around the corner, or go bowling. God, we needed it.

During that time, I was experimenting with my video camera, a newfangled toy in its rudimentary stage, and would make home movies that I would edit by transferring the tape from one machine to another, pausing and recording to make my cuts. It sounds prehistoric now; it was exciting and cutting edge at the time.

Before long I began coming up with funny video concepts for the Shanti staff to create in honor of long-term staff members who were leaving the agency.

When [our founding executive director Daniel P. Warner](#) was leaving Shanti in 1988, he starred in his own farewell video, in which he donned full S&M regalia and terrorized the staff like a leather master. It was hilarious. Daniel showed it to other AIDS agency directors at a farewell luncheon. They were mortified.

It was harder for some folks to enjoy a sense of humor during those dark days. I get it.

When Mike Kennedy, Shanti’s director of Education, announced in 1992 that he would be relocating to Charlotte, NC with his wife Diane and their newborn son, James, I had his farewell video idea immediately.

Mike Kennedy with son James and his wife, Diane. (1992)

What if we set his video twenty years in the future – the year 2012! – and Mike’s son James returned to Shanti to find out more about his father, who had somehow disappeared? And wouldn’t it be kind of funny if the adult James was played by our receptionist Craig in full drag?

The resulting video (watch it above) has all the charm and production value of a home movie circa 1992. Our affection for one another as fellow warriors in the trenches is obvious. Many of us were living with HIV/AIDS ourselves. Some of us would be taken by it.

It is worth noting that “Theme from Valley of the Dolls,” which closes the video, is a song we repeated in almost every video we made. Imagine these lyrics, in a video by people on the front lines of the AIDS epidemic before there were effective treatments:

Is this a dream? Am I here? Where are you?

Tell me

When will I know

How will I know

When will I know

Why?

The choice to portray Mike's son James in drag – on the queer spectrum, as it were – would become prescient in the years that followed, as baby James grew up to become a talented musical theater performer. I remember hearing from Mike, years after he left Shanti, that his young son James had been cast as the lead in *Oliver!* I will admit thinking to myself, “Called it!”

[James Kennedy](#) identifies as gay today. Being raised by parents whose personal and professional lives were forged during the dawn of the AIDS epidemic has been a mixed blessing, as it turns out. I had the pleasure of meeting James in New York City last year. We shared a late night pizza and I was finally able to ask him questions I had wondered for many years.

Yes, he told me, having such progressive and gay-friendly parents was a gift. He hinted, though, that his parents' AIDS trauma, more acute than anyone could imagine, might have sometimes interfered with his ability to forge his own way in queer life.

As for his father Mike Kennedy, with whom I remain in touch, along with several other Shanti staff members all these decades later, he has nothing but fatherly pride for his son, albeit mixed with parental concern. “James being gay doesn't bother me at all,” he told me, “but what happened to Matthew Shepherd scares the hell out of me.”

Father and son saw each other most recently when Mike attended the premiere of James' new musical theater piece *Prodigy*, which James wrote himself. Mike “wept like a wookiee” at the show, he told me.

James has such a promising future, even if my memories of him – and of Shanti, and of a certain fading trauma – are rooted in the past.

That's okay. I knew him when.

Mark

