



My Coming Out Story

The story of fighting HIV is that of bravery and courage in the face of great adversity.

June 7, 2023 By [Paul Kawata](#)

At 16 I realized feelings for my best friend were about to become a problem. I'm sharing my coming out story because there are too many working to define this pivotal moment in my life as shameful and wrong. They are using my community and my life for their political gain by telling lies about what it means to be LGBTQ.

After decades of HIV prevention work, our movement knows to prioritize people with lived experience and not folks who have no understanding, but lots of judgements. My story is about a kid who didn't want to be gay because good Japanese boys were supposed to fit the mold of the model quiet American. I spent the rest of high school failing to suppress my sexual feelings and looking for a way get "fixed." Back then nobody talked about being gay. We wrongly thought it was something shameful. I hid and suffered until I needed therapy. In truth, I hoped counseling would cure me. When people say being gay is a choice, they have no idea of the harm they are causing for kids who are confused and scared by feelings they don't understand and can't control.

I was that little boy who could not hide his gayness. My mouth opens, and a purse falls out. I was born this way. From an early age, I loved Barbra Streisand, the Supremes, and musicals much to the bafflement of my parents. You could say it was in my DNA. That's why I know being gay is not a choice. Who would choose a life full with stigma, discrimination, and threats of violence? At the same time, you can't taste freedom and not want to be free. As Americans, we innately understand this proposition. Being gay is who I was meant to be and praying to God would not change that reality.

In college I could live a lie and be miserable or open my heart to love. We were both pledging the same fraternity. It was the kind of love that is only for the young. Full of drama, testosterone, and keeping our love a secret. The closet is an awful place to live. While I wanted to tell the world, the culture was not ready. So, I began my lifelong journey to reconcile my desire for men with the good Japanese boy narrative. If I was going to be homosexual, I wanted to be a great homosexual. It was the late '70s at the height of the EST movement, and I turned to Gay EST, the Advocate Experience to be part of the vanguard who believed we could change the world by coming out to friends and family. The act of speaking our truth held immense power. I still believe in coming out. Sharing my story is how I heal my life.

This photo was taken at the 1979 San Francisco Pride Celebration. I'm marching with my new

family from the Advocate Experience behind a banner that would bring me great pride in my old age. This photo marks the exact moment I came out to family and friends because it was on the cover of the San Francisco Chronicle. Surprise! I was blessed to find my new family. They helped me understand and believe I was OK. Their values formed the foundation for my activism, I am Gay and I Love You. Three years later, an unknown virus would again change the course of my life. I never strived to run a national organization. Back then no one wanted these jobs. It was considered career suicide. Like so many, I had no choice because people I loved were getting sick and dying. I could not live with myself if I did nothing. Like many, I jumped blindly to fight an epidemic that was scary and completely unknown. It was not without a cost. I still work to manage the trauma from the early days of the epidemic. I would be lying if I didn't acknowledge the sadness and grief that sits in my soul. For me, it's the combination of growing up Gay in America with the trauma of fighting the HIV epidemic in the early days that defines my life and the lives of so many who came of age at that time.

Margaret Heckler, President Reagan's Secretary of Health, and Human Services said we would have a vaccine in four years. I told my family in Seattle that I would be gone four or at most five years. Little did I know. Little did we all know. The story of fighting HIV is that of bravery and courage in the face of great adversity. I will not allow others to control our narrative. We are not groomers or pedophiles. The implication is offensive and wrong. We are heroes who changed the world and saved our people. HIV is no longer a death sentence. We built a healthcare infrastructure from nothing. Working in Washington, our community created and maintains multiple federal budget lines that annually provide billions in support. Activism not only changed the FDA drug approval process, but it also gave meaning to our lives. We even got money from the Trump administration to end the HIV epidemic in America. Don't tell me we can't achieve the impossible.

There is a whole generation coming of age in the 2023 era of trauma and vilification of the LGBTQ community. It is real shit right now and will only get worse with the Presidential election next year. I worry for the future. Then I remember that we stand on the shoulders of heroes. To the 16-year-old boy, I say look at me now. This picture was taken when I was a marshal at DC Pride. Our history documents our strength. Overcoming adversity is in our DNA. It took a long time and many tears for that scared boy to become this outrageous Queen. While I am still a work in progress, coming out and speaking my truth changed the trajectory of my life. Happy Pride everyone!

Yours in the struggle,

Paul Kawata