Our Untold Stories

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On March 10th Visual AIDS hosted a public discussion entitled TIME IS NOT A LINE in which thoughts, feelings and ideas about the ongoing AIDS crisis were shared across generations in small and large groups, and through presentations. Hanging out afterwards, eating what was left of the snacks, Visual AIDS program manager **Ted Kerr** had a chance to speak with activist and writer **Ron Goldberg** who had been in attendance. Goldberg shared that he was working on a memoir about his early AIDS activism, explaining that putting history down on paper to share was important to him because of his own search for a past. Goldberg shares his experience in the essay that follows.

For many ACT UP veterans and AIDS Generation survivors, 2012 was the year our lives became “History.” Long-hidden home movies - shaky videos of us marching on City Hall and storming the NIH, so young and passionate, laughing, screaming, waving innocently at the camera and angrily keening over the bodies of our dead friends - were being projected onto movie screens, and our actions of 25 years ago cited on TV, in newspapers, and on the web as a benchmark for effective

activism.

It was something of a shock.

It's not that we doubted the importance of what we had done - we knew, even then, that we were changing the world - but I don't think we ever thought that anyone would care. After all, so few seemed to care about AIDS in the first place. But now that it appears they do, we have to begin to think about the history that we're sharing.

For me, this is not an idle question. For the past four years, I've been working on my own retelling of our history, a memoir of my life with ACT UP titled, "Boy With the Bullhorn" - I was, among other things ACT UP's unofficial Chant Queen - and I constantly worry if I'm up to the task of telling this dense and complex story. I worry, like Ouisa in John Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation," about turning real and profound experiences into anecdotes, and simplifying complicated events and personalities into stock figures playing out their roles in some neat and tidy narrative. I worry about presenting a nostalgic, rose-colored version of ACT UP--one that glorifies it as a golden age of community activism, but without capturing the anger, confusion, love, terror, humor, and despair that made it run.

But even if I manage to retain some control over how I tell my story, I still worry about how it will be heard. I know how hungry we can be, particularly young queer people, to discover our history. We long to find heroes to look up to and to see our lives reflected in a film or photograph, or in the pages of a book or web site.

I remember how excited I was when I started to uncover my own queer heroes. A bunch of us in ACT UP had formed a study group to search out our queer activist history in celebration of the upcoming Twentieth Anniversary of Stonewall. Most of us knew the basic outline of the story and how the riots gave birth to Gay Liberation and the gay rights movement, but we didn't understand it in any great depth. After all, it wasn't something that was taught in school or passed down by families around the kitchen table.

But then again, it wasn't being talked about in our community either. When I went looking for books on our history, I came away from the Oscar Wilde and Different Light Bookshops practically empty-handed. Oh, they had plenty of self-help and coming out books, stacks of lesbian and gay fiction and erotica, and shelves of AIDS and health-related materials, but only a small handful of books on gay history and politics, most notably John D'Emilio's essential "Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities," which introduced me to Harry Hay, Barbara Gittings, Frank Kameny, and other hidden heroes of the pre-liberation age. The one volume I found on Gay Liberation, Toby Marotta's "The Politics of Homosexuality," was buried at the bottom of the discount bin.

Fortunately, I was headed to San Francisco for a week's vacation and, while there, I stumbled into an old used bookstore in the Castro where I discovered a treasure-trove of out-of-print books on Gay Liberation and the early gay rights movement. I felt like a miner who had hit the mother lode. I raced up and down the aisles grabbing as many books as I could carry--Donn Teal's "The Gay Militants;" "Sappho Was a Right-On Women," by Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love; Arthur Bell's dishy "Dancing the Gay Lib Blues;" and the remarkable "Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation" anthologies edited by Karla Jay and Allen Young. I spent hours flipping through the pages, wide-eyed and amazed at the bravery, wit, and daring of my queer predecessors, and

seeing my own activist life reflected back at me through their experiences.

It took me a while, but then it suddenly hit me--why all these books were here.

This wasn't a bookstore. It was a cemetery.

Who were the men whose names were inscribed on the inside covers and title pages of these books, and what were *their* stories? What had brought them to San Francisco? What was it like here before the epidemic, during those halcyon "Tales of the City" days? Where were they when they heard that Harvey Milk was shot? Did they light candles and join the march to City Hall that night, and did they riot six months later when Dan White was sentenced? Who was the first in their circle to get sick? Were they caretakers or activists--or perhaps both? Did they set up tents with the ARC/AIDS vigil or volunteer with The Shanti Project? Did they sew Quilt panels or join ACT UP and block the Golden Gate Bridge? What remained of their lives, their friends, and the community they knew, and who would be able to tell their stories?

This cruel juxtaposition is at the heart of our history, and I think about it whenever I write or talk to young people about ACT UP.

While I am, of course, happy to share our story of empowerment and queers fighting back, and hope you are inspired and see your own lives reflected in the tale, you must also understand that a crucial part - no, *the* crucial part - of this history is what (or who) is missing and the stories that cannot be told.

For despite all the footage and photos, the history of ACT UP is in many ways a ghost story, filled with lost friends, lovers, and comrades whose very absence has a palpable physical presence. And it is our responsibility - mine as a survivor and recorder of this history, and yours as heirs to our legacy - to not only celebrate what we accomplished, but to grapple with how much and how many we have lost.

And to remember, always, why it is they are gone.

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Ron Goldberg is a writer and activist. As a leading member of the ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) from 1987-94, Ron organized many of the group's most famous demonstrations, participated in countless zaps and actions, and served as ACT UP's unofficial "Chant Queen." He has spoken at high schools

and colleges about ACT UP and the lessons of AIDS Activism, and his articles have appeared in *Poz, OutWeek,* and the literary journal *Central Park*.Ron is currently writing a memoir, “Boy With the Bullhorn,” about ACT UP and his coming of age as a gay man, citizen, and activist on the front lines of the AIDS crisis.

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