#RIPLarryKramer The Antidote to HIV

HIV was the menace. The silent killer. Then Larry Kramer came around and gave HIV something to be afraid about.

May 27, 2020 By Shawn Decker

HIV can be a scary thing. And it works best when it is shrouded in stigma and numbing silence.

But Larry Kramer was the antidote. He held a megaphone. He screamed in the face of the killer. He gave HIV something to be afraid about. Larry Kramer saved lives.

I saw Larry Kramer in person for the first time in 2000. My friend, Stephen Gendin, had passed, and Larry spoke at his memorial. Larry went off on pharma greed, among other things, shouting in a room that was silent with grief. He bemoaned the fact that he had to wear suspenders not as a fashion choice, but because the virus and the meds used to treat it had removed all of the fat from his ass. He said that we were being over-medicated and that pharma greed was filling us up with pills with little regard for the longterm ramifications. I was a bit taken aback, but realized that the quiet Stephen that I knew as a friend was also a fierce activist who had been arrested at rallies. This was his friend paying tribute to a huge part of Stephen's life.

Even though I was 25 at the time, I felt like a little boy in that room. Most were older than me and, unlike me, this wasn't the first time they'd gather to mourn the loss of a friend to HIV.

In 2015, Larry, alongside his husband, David, came to UVA to do a book signing and presentation. Gwenn and I were able to hang out with him for the first time. Larry was such a sweet, gentle man. And he was in good hands with David, who made sure that things were moving along at a pace that Larry could enjoy. "He's such a teddy bear," I said to Gwenn. We both were just surprised at how, well, cute and cuddly this legendary AIDS activist was, the fierce activist who was best known for causing a ruckus.

I'm beyond grateful for having had the honor of sharing those two contrasting moments in Larry Kramer's presence. His words at Stephen's memorial gave me the courage to eventually try a week on/week off regimen with my HIV medications, which I benefited from for close to a decade before transitioning back to a daily regimen. Larry himself had also contracted hepatitis B, like me, and at the time I was worried about not only the cumulative effect on my liver, but on my ass as well.

I've read a lot of touching, honest reflections from people who had more of a front row seat to Larry Kramer than I did. On Facebook, Peter Staley shared his experiences- from a newbie at ACT UP to one of the community's sharpest activists. He talked about how Larry's messaging seemed to be stuck in time, particularly the transition from 80s to 90s activism. Peter acknowledged his criticisms as "inside baseball". I liked how truthful Peter was in sharing his grief, praise and frustrations with Larry. I've always considered the HIV community a team effort- from HIV negative case workers and advocates, to positive activists and educators. Everyone is involved. Many are on the team, but decide to stay in the dugout for various reasons and keep their status a secret.

Larry occupied an invaluable position on the team. His voice and method were so loud, that complacency within earshot of him was not an option. Whether you did what he wanted you to do made no difference: when Larry spoke, people took notice and acted accordingly in the best ways in which they were able to help the team. The truth is, the HIV community would not have been the same without Larry. Hell, the world would not be the same without him.

Larry Kramer helped spearhead a style and purposeful activism that has been used in so many different movements. He saved lives and, well, he did it his way.

Rest in peace, Larry.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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