Rising

April 19, 2018 By Martha Warriner Jarrett

Last year's ABC mini-series "When We Rise" was an education for me. Because I'm not gay, my involvement with HIV/AIDS issues when the epidemic was at it's height was minimal. I had a few acquaintances who were HIV positive, but I didn't know anyone who died. In other words, I came late to the party. For me, watching the show was both informative and painful. It followed a series of characters (an amalgam of real people) from the peace movement during the Vietnam War, through the Gay Liberation Movement in San Francisco (where they all met each other), the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the eighties and nineties, the assassination of Harvey Milk, and ended in 2015 with the Supreme Court's decision overturning California Prop. 8 (banning same-sex marriage) and the federal Defense of Marriage Act, resulting in same-sex marriage becoming legal.

The series was based in part on Cleve Jones' (AIDS Memorial Quilt) memoir, which I also read. The series was painful for me because it put a name and a face on the victims of this tragic period. It's one thing to know that something like 40,000 people a year died from AIDS. It's an entirely different thing to watch someone named Richard, and someone named Rodrigo, die. It was also painful to watch the effect their deaths had on their loved ones. I can't imagine what it must have been like to be a gay man living in San Francisco or New York during that period. Fortunately, because HIV/AIDS is now a manageable disease, I will probably never know. and neither will a lot of you who, like me, became positive long after HIV/AIDS had something you could live with. I don't want to preach to the choir, but being able to identify with those who came before me, and on whose shoulders I stand today, has meant a lot to me.

I also gained a greater understanding of the history of the disease, all the way back to when the SIV (simian immunodeficiency virus) made the jump from apes to humans in what was then the Belgian Congo, from a biography of Freddie Mercury (Queen) called "Somebody to Love." The book not only told Freddie's story, but also the story of HIV/AIDS. It's well worth a read if you're interested in such things.

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