Oprah on the Ugliness of AIDS Hysteria, 1987 and Today

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Oprah's program today took her back to Williamson, West Virginia, where she did a show in 1987 after the town had gone hysterical when Mike Sisco, a man with AIDS, went for a dip in the public swimming pool on a hot summer day.

The original broadcast was exceptionally powerful and raw, with some of the nastiest, meanest and ugliest comments about people with AIDS I have ever seen broadcast on a mainstream program. Watching them made my skin crawl with horrible memories I had mostly suppressed.

Today's show was fascinating, as some of those who expressed the most bitterly ignorant (and painful) comments in 1987 returned to reflect on the episode and their reaction at the time.

Mike Sisco died in the mid 90s, after having been cruelly humiliated and shunned in the community in which he was raised. I admire how he conducted himself with such calm dignity amidst an awful and frightening community environment.

Today, even while the fear of casual contagion has lessened, AIDS-related stigma persists and in some ways has gotten worse. People with HIV continue to be prejudged, marginalized, ostracized and demeaned. The language isn't quite as stark as it was in 1987, but subtlety has not lessened the effect.

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