Vito Russo

October 27, 2013 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Born: 1946
Died: 1990

"You can't plead tolerance for gays by saying that they're just like everyone else. Tolerance is something we should extend to people who are not like everyone else."
- Vito Russo

Vito Russo is an official honoree today for LGBT History Month 2013, which this year has several HIV-positive honorees.

Vito Russo was a U.S. LGBT activist, film historian and author best known for his book and live lecture presentations of *The Celluloid Closet*, a comprehensive project that looked at how the history of motion pictures and Hollywood portrayed the LGBT community.

Russo originally published *The Celluloid Closet* in book form in 1981, after developing his early material from fundraiser screenings of camp films by the Gay Activists Alliance, an early gay rights group in the late 1970s and early '80s. Between 1979 and 1982, he gained fame by presenting lecture and film clip presentations at colleges, universities and independent cinemas across the country.

In 1983, Russo wrote, produced and co-hosted the *Our Time* series, the first LGBT hard news documentary video shown on U.S. public television, which aired on WNYC in 13 episodes tackling issues such as gay history, drag, alcoholism and AIDS, featuring Larry Kramer.

Russo also was a co-founder of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), a watchdog group that monitors representation of the homosexual community in the mainstream media.

The filmmaker also was an active member of ACT UP in its early days after being diagnosed with HIV in 1985. Russo died from AIDS-related complications in 1990.

In 1996, *The Celluloid Closet* was posthumously made into an HBO documentary, which was narrated by Lily Tomlin. It won several awards, including four Emmys, the Peabody Award and the award for Freedom of Expression at the 1996 Sundance Film Festival.

Go to lgbthistorymonth.com for more information about Russo and the other honorees.

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