



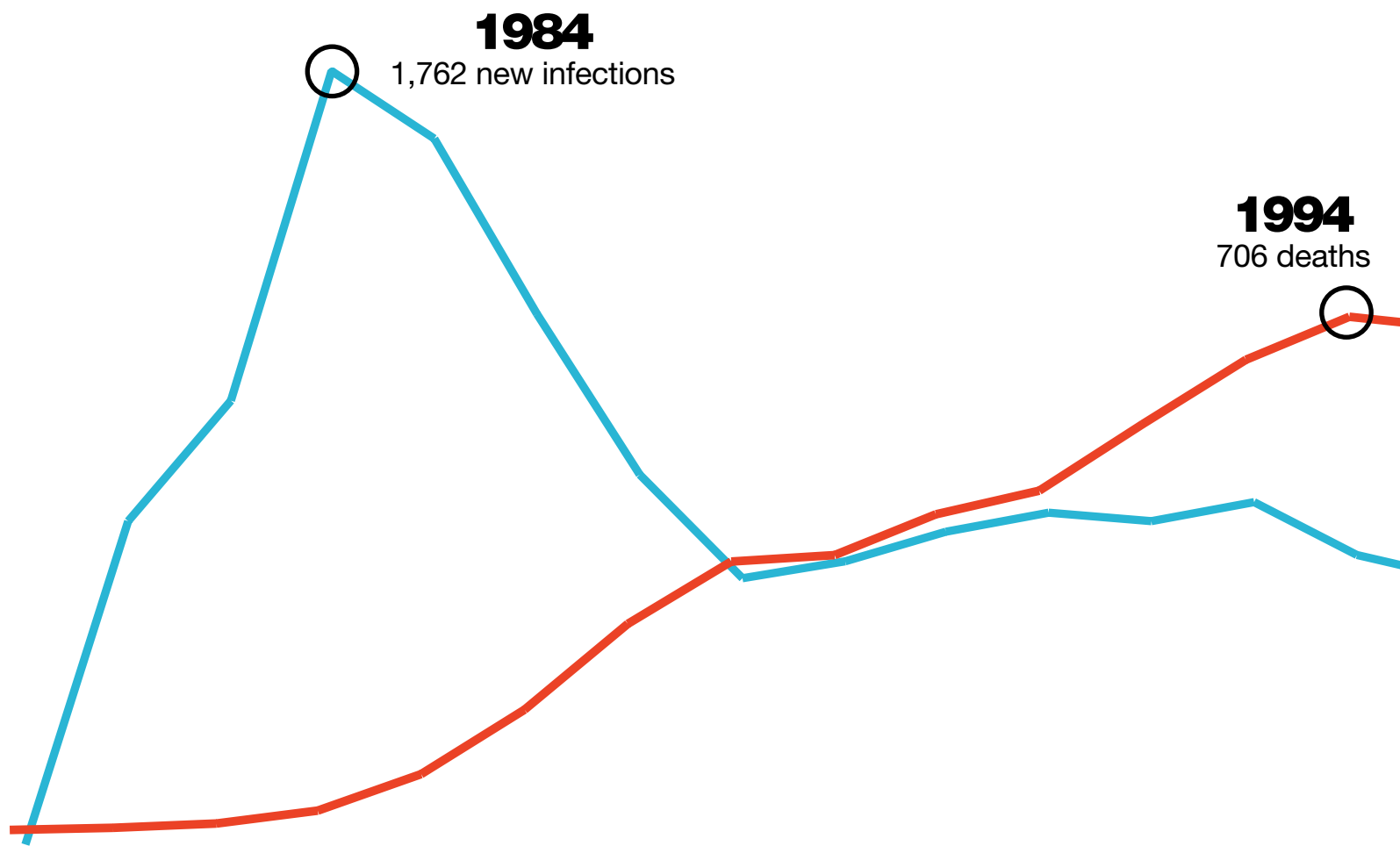
act news

WINTER/SPRING 2012



act gay.

30 YEARS OF GAY MEN FIGHTING HIV/AIDS



1981 1982 1983 1984 1985 1986 1987 1988 1989 1990 1991 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996

Four cases of the "gay plague" surface in Canada. The official name is changed from Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

The first reports of "gay cancer" in the Canadian press and medical journals.

Gays in Health Care and Hassle Free Clinic hold a public health forum, where the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) is founded.

Public health authorities in San Francisco order 14 bathhouses to close. ACT responds by saying that closing bathhouses makes AIDS education even more difficult by driving sex underground.

ACT comes under fire for using profanity in a safer sex pamphlet for gay men.

Ethno-specific AIDS service organizations and other projects sprout up in Toronto to reach specific demographics affected by HIV/AIDS, especially gay men of colour. Many of these groups get their start with support from ACT.

An early incarnation of ACT's Safer BDSM Project is criticized by city politicians and pundits, who try to use it to pull city funding for ACT's work. ACT stands its ground and city funding continues, despite annual threats.

Thousands participate in an AIDS Action Now! "die-in" at Toronto's Lesbian and Gay Pride Day, demanding more AIDS funding.

ACT launches a dedicated Gay Men's Outreach program with initiatives tailored to gay and bi men, including greatly expanded peer outreach in bathhouses and parks.

Highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) is introduced, marking the first year that the number of AIDS deaths in Ontario starts to decline. Following pressure from AIDS groups and gay activists, the Ontario government launches the Trillium Drug Program to cover treatment costs for people living with HIV/AIDS.

1618

new HIV infections across Ontario in 2008

206

HIV-related deaths across Ontario

1996

1,008 new infections

1996 1997 1998 1999 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011

In response to research suggesting gay and bi men in relationships are abandoning condom use, ACT launches the "I Can Relate" campaign to dispel myths about HIV and safer sex in relationships.

Following the merger of the gay-positive Wellesley Hospital with St. Michael's Hospital, gay men and people living with HIV/AIDS form the We're No Angels Coalition to demand the continuation of sexual and reproductive health services.

Responding to a sudden increase in HIV infections among gay and bi men in Toronto, ACT launches the "Welcome to Condom Country" campaign.

ACT undertakes a city-wide needs assessment of trans communities, using focus groups and interviews to create recommendations for program improvements.

During the International AIDS Conference held in Toronto, ACT brings issues affecting gay and bi men to the fore, leading to the establishment of the Global Forum on MSM and HIV.

ACT launches monthly discussion groups for gay and bi men that focus on a wide range of sexual health topics.

ACT launches GPS (Gay Poz Sex) a research based sexual health program for HIV-positive gay men.

ACT's "Attack of the Cursed Syphilis" campaign encourages gay and bi men to get tested for syphilis, which is again on the rise in Toronto.

In recognition of its origins in, and continuing commitment to Toronto's gay community, a community meeting votes to select ACT as Honoured Group of the Pride Parade.

ACT launches Resilience campaign to highlight the strength of gay and bi men through resisting homophobia and HIV/AIDS for 30 years.



GAY MEN: 30 YEARS OF RESILIENCE



At the 2011 Pride parade, ACT returned to its roots in Toronto's gay community with a contingent marching under the banner: "Our Community is Stronger Together."



It's part of a new approach to HIV prevention and health promotion in all communities, but especially for gay and bi men.



We used to look almost exclusively at the factors that caused poor health in populations that were vulnerable to HIV. We did research on why people were less likely to use condoms, and developed education programs to try to change that behaviour.



What we often neglected to look at were the factors that caused better health in our communities. While gay and bi men continue to make up the majority of new HIV infections, they are still the community most likely to use condoms.



In addition to being something to celebrate, it's also something we can learn from. How do people who have faced so much adversity manage to overcome these challenges, staying healthy and resilient?

It's a shift we're making in all areas of our work: research, training, health promotion, and support.

Our Gay Men's Community Health Programs have taken this to heart, with a campaign launched at Pride to celebrate the resilience of gay men through 30 years of the HIV epidemic in Toronto. It's a community we're proud to come from, and a community we continue to serve as a priority.

This issue of the ACT newsletter is dedicated to gay men.

Hazelle

Hazelle Palmer
Executive Director
AIDS Committee of Toronto

SURVIVOR PROFILE: LEONARD SMITH



“We sort of knew we were positive,” Leonard Smith recalls the early days of the AIDS epidemic, before treatment options were available. “Back then, we knew it but we didn’t know what to do about it, so it was better to stay away from it until we got sick.”

He was living with his lover in Toronto’s Little India when HIV hit the city in the early 1980s. Eventually, his lover did get sick and was diagnosed HIV-positive in 1985. Leonard was diagnosed in 1989, and took care of his lover until he passed away in 1991. Afterward, Leonard took care of another friend who had been diagnosed, until he also died in 1992.

“I went a little crazy,” he says. He moved to Montreal for a year, then returned to his apartment and started a new relationship. “We were together for about three years, and then he passed away. Ever since, I’ve been dealing with it on my own.”

Multiple losses are a common thread in the stories told by long-term survivors of HIV who were diagnosed in the

early days of the epidemic. Before treatment advances in the mid-1990s, the chances of surviving an HIV-positive diagnosis were much lower than today. And those who did survive left behind entire networks of friends and lovers.

“I’m sort of like the last one standing,” Leonard explains. “It’s really difficult because you can’t just call somebody. There are no phone booths in heaven. Or in hell.”

In addition to the emotional trauma of a diagnosis in those early days, many long-term survivors are now also facing the challenges of aging with HIV.

“As long as I had one medical problem, I could deal with it,” Leonard says. “Where it got me was about five years ago; then I started to get multiple things happening. That’s when I started losing my abilities.”

We are only now starting to understand the extent to which HIV has an impact on aging, as the generation that survived the 1980s and early 90s gets older. Aging with HIV can present a number of challenges, such as long-term side

WHAT IS A LONG-TERM SURVIVOR?

It’s a term we’ve used at ACT to describe people who have been living with HIV for a long time. But not everyone agrees on what it means, and to whom it applies.

“Somebody who’s been living with HIV for five years could consider themselves a long-term survivor, along with someone who’s been living with HIV for 25 years,” explains Winston Husbands, ACT’s Director of Research.

“But if we’re talking about long-term survivor as an identity, it seems to emerge around gay men that lived in Toronto, or North America, when the epidemic first emerged,” says Jessica Cattaneo, ACT’s Manager of Evaluation and Program Development. “It emerged as pre-HAART, and the experience and trauma related to that diagnosis.”

HAART, or highly-active antiretroviral therapy, was widely adopted in the mid-1990s as a treatment that significantly improved the health and life expectancy for people with HIV. Because HAART changed the reality of life with HIV so dramatically, the trauma associated with a pre-HAART diagnosis would have been very different from a diagnosis today.

“There’s also the aspect of understanding long-term survivorship in terms of loss over the years, and coming to terms with that,” Winston expands. “Because of the epidemiology of HIV in Toronto, of course it’s mostly gay men.”

“IT HAS CHANGED A LOT FOR ME, BECAUSE NOW I FEEL LIKE THERE IS A PART OF US – THE GAY COMMUNITY – THAT DOES APPRECIATE EACH OTHER AND DOES CARE ABOUT EACH OTHER, AND I SEE THAT EVERY WEEK.”

effects from treatment, co-morbidities, and cognitive health concerns. The physical effects of HIV can also affect mental and emotional health.

“Everything is difficult. I can’t go anywhere,” explains Leonard. “I have to rely on people to come and visit me, and everybody’s working and they’ve got their life. I think that’s the most difficult problem that I have, is not being able to talk to people.”

Through consultation with long-term survivors and the organizations that work with them, ACT has developed new programs and revamped existing services to better meet their changing needs.

Leonard started attending ACT’s Good Company Lunch to meet others who were in the same boat. Robin Rhodes, ACT’s Community Support Programs Coordinator, facilitates the luncheon every week.

“Each of the people in the lunch are in similar situations,” Robin explains. “They all face multiple challenges in vary-

ing ways. That’s the nature of this particular group. Everyone has great commonalities on some level or another.”

“If we haven’t gone through it, we’re going through it,” Leonard adds. “If somebody’s not well, we know exactly how they feel. Because we’ve been not well.”

Robin also enrolled Leonard in ACT’s Buddy Program, where he is teamed up with a volunteer who visits his apartment twice a week for conversation. The program helps break down social isolation and provides informal emotional support to anyone living with HIV.

“I was beginning to think that there was no compassion left,” Leonard says. “It has changed a lot for me, because now I feel like there is a part of us – the gay community – that does appreciate each other and does care about each other, and I see that every week.”

Through two projects, *Planning for the Long-Term* and *Living with HIV over the Long-Term*, ACT consulted with people who have been living long-term with HIV to ask how their different needs and experiences required a tailored response from AIDS service organizations like ACT.

“If we look at the kinds of issues that are emerging in the context of gay men in the focus groups, it’s those issues around multiple loss and a decline in informal social supports,” says Jessica.

“Supports for daily living,” Winston adds. “People reach the stage where they feel they can’t keep up. Guys who have been living on their own for a long time, feeling like they can’t keep up with everyday demands of daily living.”

Financial stability was also reported as a concern in the focus groups. “And related to a lack of financial stability,” Jessica says, “is the social connections that you might lose because socializing can be a challenge on a limited income, you can’t go out for dinner or brunch every weekend.”

But she is quick to add, “Long-term survivors, or the people we call long-term survivors, have been instrumental in developing creative responses to HIV. It’s not just a question of their needs, but also their contribution and what we can learn from them”.

BUILDING THE LEADERSHIP OF TORONTO'S HIV MOVEMENT



For ACT, volunteer training is more than just preparing individuals to deliver our programs and services. It's about developing the next generation of the HIV movement in Toronto.

“To me, it's building future leaders in Toronto,” says Sergio Martinez, ACT's Program Volunteer Resources Manager, who has been delivering Core Skills Training to ACT staff and volunteers for 10 years.

“And that's manifested in many ways,” says Bobby Hrehoruk, Development Volunteer Coordinator. “From the people that are going to create and implement the new harm reduction strategies of the next 10 years, to the future chair of the Scotiabank AIDS Walk for Life.”

Whether they want to do prevention education, support people living with HIV, or help raise funds for our work, all ACT volunteers get their start in Core Skills Training, a comprehensive program covering topics ranging from HIV transmission to cultural competence.

“I think it's a really good indication of how much this organization values the link between training volunteers and having volunteers be effective in their role,” Sergio adds.

Once volunteers graduate from the program, they have the option of choosing a role that suits their skills and interests, or pursuing further training specific to a program area, such as outreach or support group facilitation.

“WE'RE LOOKING FOR LEADERS IN THIS MOVEMENT.”

TOPICS COVERED IN CORE SKILLS TRAINING

- HIV/AIDS 101
- Social Determinants of Health
- Communication Skills
- Assessing Clients and Making Referrals
- Anti-Oppression and Cultural Competence
- Living with HIV
- and more!

WHAT'S IN IT FOR GAY AND BI MEN?

“There are many reasons why gay men come to volunteer at ACT. The primary reason is because they want to build a sense of community for themselves. They want to contribute in a significant way to the community they are a part of.”

— Sergio

“You're surrounded by people who understand your identity. Especially when it comes to the complexities of being gay. There is a large cohort of gay men, and social justice is prioritized.” — Bobby

“IT CERTAINLY HELPED MY OWN CONFIDENCE IN BEING ABLE TO TALK TO GUYS.”



VOLUNTER PROFILE: DAN DE FIGUEIREDO

When Dan De Figueiredo first entered the ACT offices, volunteering was the last thing on his mind.

“I was really in a crisis where I didn’t know where to turn,” he says. He dropped into ACT to talk to an on-call counsellor about trouble he was having with addictions. “He talked me through the main issues I was dealing with at the time. We worked on what my plan would be for the next day, and the next week.”

After going into recovery for five months, Dan decided he wanted to get involved in activities that focused on something other than his addictions and recovery. He asked about volunteer opportunities at ACT, and almost immediately he was participating in the Core Skills Training program.

“Initially, I thought I’d work in harm reduction outreach, because I have a background in terms of using substances,” he recalls. But he was drawn into the gay men’s outreach program, much to his surprise.



“In my mind it’s funny, because I used to be the shyest person in the world. I couldn’t even make eye contact.” Two years later, Dan is now a familiar face representing ACT in bathhouses and special events, handing out free condoms, lube and information to gay and bi men.

“Now, partly because I’ve been through a lot, and because of my age, I can actually talk about anything at all.”

From there, Dan was recruited to help deliver forums as part of the Pig Sex Project, focusing on HIV prevention and health promotion for gay and bi guys who identify as “sex pigs” – guys who like to have dirty, raunchy sex.

“It was really interesting, because we’re talking about such sexually-charged subjects, but guys are talking about them in such an intellectual way. Gay men can talk about sex and be really articulate about it.”

It’s these kinds of conversations, he says, that are the most rewarding part of his volunteer work.



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 **SCOTIABANK AIDS WALK FOR LIFE** **THANKS FOR WALKING TORONTO!**

Together, we have raised over \$450,000 for people living with, affected by, and at risk for HIV/AIDS in Toronto.

aidswalktoronto.ca

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 National Ballet School of Canada 6pm-11pm, 400 Jarvis St. Toronto

Public Preview March 16 to 18
 Edward Day Gallery, 952 Queen St. West Toronto

For tickets and info, visit www.snap-toronto.com

PRESENTED BY  

SHOWING SOME SPUNK!

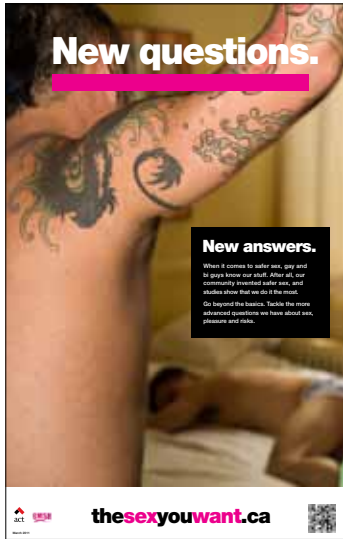
SPUNK! is a new program of ACT's Gay Youth and Gay Men's Harm Reduction Program, launching in February 2012 in collaboration with Casey House. SPUNK! is a discussion based peer support group for gay, bi or queer (GBQ)-identified men who are interested in exploring changes in substance use and risky sex.

The program consists of six facilitated weekly sessions which take participants through a process of building confidence and competence to make the changes for better health that they wish to make. It uses Motivational Interviewing both as a process, and also to provide practical tools and strategies for change.

SPUNK! is based on the successful outcomes and previous collaboration with Casey House of the research project Exploring Choices. SPUNK! reflects ACT's commitment to putting research into action, as well as building new programming that nurtures resilience among gay men of all ages. It also addresses a gap in harm reduction and sex positive programming for gay men who need support to make changes in substance use.

For more information including recruitment, visit www.acttoronto.org/spunk, or call Adam at 416-340-8484 ext. 235.

thesexyouwant.ca



When ACT was approached to develop new resources for gay and bisexual men, the goal was to create both print and online resources on emerging issues in HIV prevention and transmission. The resources, which include pocket brochures, promo cards, condom/lube packs, and the website thesexyouwant.ca were launched in the summer of 2011 and are available in 9 languages.

“The Sex You Want” was created by ACT in partnership with the provincial Gay Men’s Sexual Health Alliance and in consultation with an Advisory Committee of HIV and sexual health educators from across Ontario.

So what was so new? Well, first of all it was developed from a strength-based approach. When it comes to safer sex, gay and bi guys knew their stuff. Gay men invented safer sex, and studies show that gay men practise it the most.

The resources don’t tell men what they already knew. Instead, they acknowledge that our knowledge of HIV has evolved and there are a variety of ways that guys negotiate and manage risk.

The Sex You Want goes beyond the basics to tackle more advanced questions guys have about sex, pleasure and risks. Of course, the materials mention condoms (as they remain the best protection against HIV transmission) but they also tackle other questions including:

- Isn’t it safer on top?
- Can I have sex without a condom if my HIV viral load is undetectable?
- Are there drugs to prevent HIV?
- Is it dangerous to ‘party and play’?
- Who actually uses a condom when they’re in a relationship?

Promoted in print and online, The Sex You Want represents one example of ACT’s ongoing commitment to the health of gay men.

To find out more visit www.thesexyouwant.ca

NEW PROGRAMMING FOR YOUNG GAY MEN:



Young gay men have little access to sexual health promotion information or education, and often face the psychological burdens of coping with social marginalization, stigma, internal and external homophobia, and bullying. In Toronto, there is a need for programs for young gay men that provide not only information about HIV and sexual health, but provide opportunities to address the broad health and social development needs of young gay men.

ACT is pleased to launch Totally OutRIGHT, a sexual health leadership course for young gay men 18 – 26 offered through ACT’s Gay Men’s Community Education Program. It’s a community intervention designed to address both the health and social development needs of young gay men. Using a comprehensive program of 17 workshops, presentations, and interactive learning activities, the course builds knowledge and skills necessary to foster

resilience. By empowering young gay men to become effective leaders in their own sexual and social networks, Totally OutRIGHT addresses an essential need to support healthy sexual development of young gay men.

Originally developed by the Community-Based Research Centre in Vancouver in 2005 where it has been successfully delivered and refined ever since, it has been brought by ACT to Toronto where we’ve introduced some innovations which include a sophisticated evaluation, and the involvement of young gay men who sit on a Community Advisory Committee. We’ve also received funding to hire a peer youth worker to help deliver the courses!

Totally OutRIGHT will be offered in March and June 2012. For more information about the program, including recruitment information, visit www.actoronto.org/to or call Rui at 416-340-8484 ext. 264.

EVERY DAY, TWO PEOPLE ARE INFECTED WITH HIV IN TORONTO. ONE OF THEM IS A GAY MAN.

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 prevent. support. act.

design: Raymond Heikio

AIDS Committee of Toronto

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Monday to Thursday 10 am-9 pm Friday 10 am-5 pm



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The AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) develops and delivers innovative programs and services that promote the dignity,
health and well-being of individuals and communities living with, affected by and at risk for HIV.

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I'd also like to become a member of ACT! (Fee \$5)

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Please charge my credit card above the additional fee.

I can't afford the membership fee – it will be waived by ACT.

I've given \$5 or more to ACT in the last year through monthly giving; please apply to my membership.