AIDS Activism

ACT UP, Fight Back, Fight AIDS



By 1987, the American death toll from AIDS topped 40,000 with HIV infections in the millions. The anger, frustration, and fear simmering in the gay community found its release with the creation of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in New York City. Soon chapters sprung up in communities across the nation. The initial goals: bring wider attention to the AIDS pandemic, pressure the federal and local governments to provide support and services to those with AIDS, streamline the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) drug approval process, and lower the cost of pharmaceuticals.

ACT UP's mash-up of street theatrics and media savvy with traditional civil disobedience protest tactics changed the media framing of people with AIDS from pitiful victim to an avenging, angry, sometimes raunchy, activist. Within two weeks of its inception, ACT UP was blocking traffic on Wall Street, and in the next three years they were protesting at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), White House, National Institutes of Health (NIH), the International AIDS Conference, St. Patrick's Cathedral, and many other sites. Their actions created change — the FDA shortened the time for drug approvals, changed its protocols to allow access to promising experimental treatments, and gave those with AIDS a voice in within the FDA. ACT UP "ultimately forced the government and the scientific community to fundamentally change the way medical research is conducted."



ACT UP "die-in" at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) headquarters, October 1988

> *"So, if I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from homophobia. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from racism. If I'm dying from anything, it's from indifference and red tape, because these are the things that are preventing an end to this crisis. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from Jesse Helms. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from the President of the United States... If I'm dying from anything—I'm dying from the fact that not enough rich, white, heterosexual men have gotten AIDS for anybody to give a shit."*
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> *Vito Russo speech, "Why We Fight,"*
> *ACT UP demonstration in Albany, NY May 9, 1988*

ACT UP New York meeting minutes listing possible future demonstrations, 15 June 1987. Archives of Sexuality and Gender

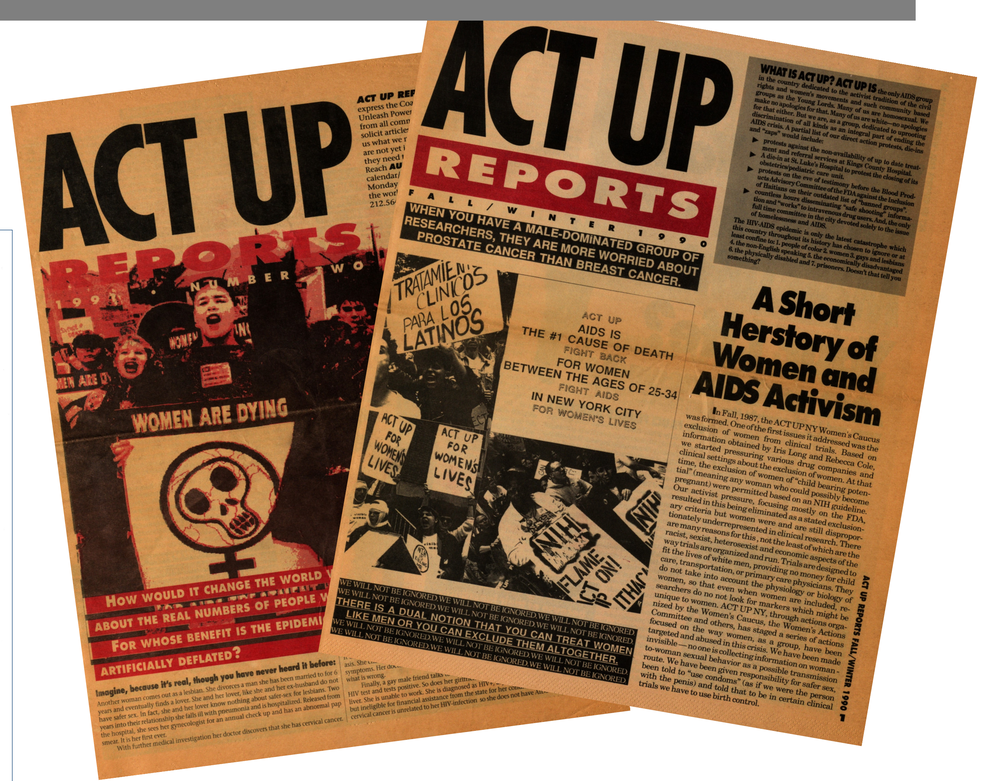
ACT UP
6/15/87 MEETING

I. Announcements:
A. Christopher Lynn will be our attorney
B. The 6/22/87 meeting will be at NYU Law School, Room 110, 40 Washington Square at 7:30 PM.
C. Bill Bahlman: announcement of Human Rights Campaign Fund meeting at the UN.
D. Excerpts from "Testing the Limits" will be screened at Gallery 303 after June 25th.
E. Steven Webb: Approximately $1600 was raised at the Gay Pride Days in washington and Boston this past weekend.

II. Gay Pride Day
A. Chris Lione's banner design was submitted and approved.
B. Re: motion to throw condoms at St. Patrick's Cathedral. Logistics Committee made a recommendation to discontinue this plan for various practical reasons. Motion was made and passed not to throw condoms at St. Patrick's Cathedral.
C. Re: ACT UP Float
1. Float Committee formed with subcommittee to handle signage.
2. We will have approximately 35 marchers around the float. (SILENCE=DEATH T-shirts optional).
3. Motion that theme of float should be a graveyard rather than a concentration camp was defeated. The ACT UP Float will be a concentration camp.

III. Recommendations for Future Actions
A. Suggestions for future demonstration sites:
1. The UN
2. Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital
3. Wall Street
4. Pfizer Pharmaceuticals Headquarters
5. The Statue of Liberty
6. The National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland
7. NYU's ATEU
8. Federal Plaza
9. Minority Hospitals
10. NYU and Bellevue
11. NYU moving to the UN
12. St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital
B. Motion that the next action be specifically geared towards the release of drugs was passed.
C. Motion that there should be two demonstrations. One immediately following Gay Pride Day and one later in July was passed.
D. Motion for Demonstration at Federal Plaza on July 1st, directed at the NIH was passed.
E. Motion for Demonstration later in July to encompass NYU and march to the UN was defeated.
F. Motion to advertise only one demonstration at Gay Pride Day was passed.
G. Discussion of Demonstration later in July tabled for next meeting.

IV. Report from March On Washington Committee





ACT UP demonstration in New York City, June 1987

> *"And then when I was dying of AIDS and could barely walk, of course it was ACT UP that saved my life. It was all of the activism and all the people who participated in that struggle to change the way the drugs were tested, to change the double-blind placebo policies, to make access for people that were dying. And it absolutely saved my life. None of that would have happened if it hadn't been for ACT UP and people like Larry Kramer driving people nuts with their anger and rage."*
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> *Cleve Jones interview,*
> *NPR Fresh Air, 29 Nov. 2016*

"The Silence=Death Project, best known for its iconic political poster, was the work of a six-person collective in New York City: Avram Finkelstein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston, Charles Kreloff, Chris Lione, and Jorge Soccarás." Wikipedia



By the mid-1990s, the national ACT UP movement collapsed due to a fracturing of goals, the development of successful antiretroviral therapies, activism fatigue, and death — in 1994 AIDS was the leading cause of death in the U.S. among people ages 25 to 44. ACT UP's legacy continues on by providing an "indelible blueprint for on-the-ground activism that has paved the way both for other movements, including Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street, and for subsequent generations of LGBTQ people to continue to fight, unrelentingly, for justice."