

December 2020



Clockwise from top left:
Interviewees Jorge Cortiñas, Crystal
Mason, Peter Altman & Brenda Lein

Action = Life: New Oral History Collection Documents Work of ACT UP in San Francisco

by Eric Sneathen

The [San Francisco ACT UP Oral History Project](#) at the GLBT Historical Society collects and documents the unique and diverse history of Bay Area direct-action movements that protested social and governmental inaction in the face of the AIDS crisis during the 1980s and 1990s. ACT

UP/San Francisco, ACT/UP Golden Gate, Stop AIDS Now Or Else, AIDS Action Pledge, Citizens for Medical Justice, Enola Gay and related groups were part of a nationwide ACT UP movement that would go on to change the very practice of medicine and speed up the transformation of cultural attitudes about gender and sexuality.

After four years of efforts, I am pleased to share that the San Francisco ACT UP Oral History Project has been completed in time for World AIDS Day this December 1. Composed of interviews with 23 Bay Area activists, this new collection in the society's Oral History Collection is among the most extensive histories of local AIDS activism in the United States. The interviews, [available here](#), paint a communal portrait of the unique challenges, debates and triumphs of this remarkable movement.

Determined Activism

Historian Joey Plaster launched the San Francisco ACT UP Oral History Project to document the determination and kinds of activism that had defined queer politics during the AIDS crisis. While the Gay Men's Health Crisis and ACT UP/New York had already been documented in films such as *How to Survive a Plague* and *United in Anger*, the history of the Bay Area's response to the epidemic had received relatively little attention until the publication of Emily Hobson's *Lavender and Red*. In her monograph, Hobson argues that Bay Area activists were the first to confront the epidemic using direct-action tactics — even before Larry Kramer gave the speech that is often regarded as the catalyst for ACT UP in New York.

The San Francisco ACT UP Oral History Project provides new information and context to ACT UP's work in the Bay Area. Plaster's [conversation with Jack Davis](#) is a prime example. Davis planned the "Blood and Money" ritual protest that Enola Gay performed at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in 1984, during which protestors poured blood on the road at the entrance to the nuclear-weapons laboratory to decry government research priorities emphasizing weaponry over AIDS research. Most accounts suggest that the blood was fake, but Jack clarifies — the blood was real. It was his own. "This was also the period when we didn't know — we knew that AIDS was transmitted by body fluids, so this blood was dangerous," Davis explains. "And most of the people watching us knew that as well."

It has been an honor to play a part in bringing these interviews to the public. I want to thank Joey for getting the project off the ground, the volunteers who supported this work over the years, and the interviewees. But the lion's share of my thanks must go to all those activists who have fought and continue to fight the battle against AIDS.

Eric Sneathen is a Ph.D. candidate in literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

From the Executive Director

Hope for the Future



by Terry Beswick

In the midst of the current pandemic, I often recall the grief of the darkest days of the AIDS pandemic, when hope was so often hard to come by. By comparison, it was a protracted war. For two decades, the death, trauma, and disruption now being experienced by so many were the daily reality for those most impacted by AIDS — gay and bisexual men, IV drug users, and communities of color.

So it is poignant to see the whole world's attention riveted on COVID-19, such vast resources deployed seemingly overnight, and the rules of biomedical research and regulation — so slow to yield in the face of AIDS — bending in ways we could not have imagined. And yet without the changes brought by AIDS to the regulatory framework, advances in biomedical research, strategies for disease control and service-delivery models, the fight against COVID-19 would most certainly be far more devastating.

Memories & Lessons

This holiday season, we can all rejoice in the hope for a safe, effective, and equitably available vaccine in the new year. We're grateful to the health-care workers, researchers and volunteers in clinical trials who have given so much for the greater good. The current spirit of cautious hope brings to mind the election of President Bill Clinton in 1992, and the advent of protease inhibitors a few years later. The collections and oral histories in the GLBT Historical Society's archives and museum, often told through the words and images of the foot soldiers of those earlier struggles, reflect these dark memories and lessons of hope for today. We take comfort in knowing they will not be forgotten.

It seems appropriate that this year, Giving Tuesday — the national day of charitable giving — falls on December 1, which has been designated as World AIDS Day since 1988. This year, more than ever, we hope that supporters of the GLBT Historical Society will [give generously](#) to support our work preserving and sharing the history of HIV/AIDS in our archives and museum.

Like other nonprofits and small businesses, the GLBT Historical Society is not immune to the economic effects of the coronavirus. With the prolonged closure of our museum and reduced revenues from the city and other sources, we have already cut several hundred thousand dollars from our operating budget in 2020 and could be forced to cut more in 2021. As a result, next year we may be forced to permanently close our museum in the Castro, which has been visited by hundreds of thousands of people from around the world since its opening in 2011.

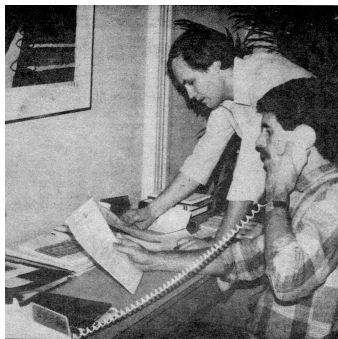
Honoring the Past

Fortunately, several generous donors have pledged a \$50,000 challenge grant this giving season. All [donations](#) received by December 31 at midnight will be matched dollar-for-dollar. Give today, and your donation of any size will be doubled! In commemoration of World AIDS Day and all those we have lost, and all who have survived to tell the tale, this Giving Tuesday, it's a gift to honor the past in the hope for a better future.

During the height of the AIDS pandemic, we used to say "stay safe" or "be here for the cure." On behalf of the staff, board and volunteers of the GLBT Historical Society, I wish you all Happy Holidays. Stay safe, and be here for the vaccine.

Terry Beswick is executive director of the GLBT Historical Society.

At the (Virtual) Museum From the Hotline to the Halls of Congress



By Brenda Lein

The GLBT Historical Society's exhibition [AIDS Treatment Activism: A Bay Area Story](#) launched earlier this year. But of all the creative, colorful and over-the-top fanfare of the street-activist movement's activities, I'd like to highlight this ordinary, black-and-white photo in the exhibition.

At first glance, [this image](#) from 1984 depicts a simple, mundane interaction, perhaps even clinical and cold. It depicts the cofounders of Project Inform, Martin Delaney (standing) and Joe Brewer (seated and on the phone) as they review a medical paper or article. I'm guessing that the photo was taken at the Project Inform offices, possibly even in the hotline room. And that's the key to understanding why the photograph is documenting a profound, historic moment.

A Vital Lifeline

Project Inform was intended to be a six-month "project," to address critical treatment information needs of people with AIDS and their loved ones, but it quickly evolved into an essential organization. At the time, there was little information about the disease, no approved treatments and no diagnostic tests. In the pre-Internet era, the telephone was a vital lifeline. Someone newly diagnosed with HIV in Texas, Louisiana, Florida or Vermont could phone, acquire information and develop a comprehensive treatment plan. A trusted, sympathetic and independent voice would be standing by to dispel misinformation about the disease and the treatment hoax *du jour*.

Relationships that began on the telephone would ultimately blossom into a massive grassroots campaign that later became AIDSWatch, lobbying Congress for funding for AIDS prevention, treatment, research

and care. These conversations became the backbone of the treatment-activist research agenda and priorities. The staff at Project Inform became the voice for hundreds of thousands of people living with HIV — communicating priorities to the research establishment based on connections with people throughout the country.

Two men discussing data and talking to someone on the phone — there is tremendous humanity behind this revolutionary act. These are the backstories of this photograph, and of the *AIDS Treatment Activism* exhibition. Project Inform closed in 2019, and Martin passed away in 2009 and Joe in 2019. But their memories live on in the history of an organization that was a lifeline for many, a beacon of hope and a powerful force for change.

Brenda Lein held the dual positions of director of information and advocacy and director of Project Immune Restoration at Project Inform.

Upcoming Online Events

Film Screening

Queer Cinematic Visions of Nikkei History



Tuesday, December 1

7:00–8:30 p.m.

Online program

Free

Join award-winning filmmaker Tina Takemoto for a screening and discussion of two short experimental films engaging with the tactile and sensory dimensions of queer Japanese American history. Takemoto combines found footage and archival materials with performance art and popular music to conjure immersive fantasies that honor queer Asian Americans who lived, loved, and labored together during the pre-World War I era and beyond. This is the last of three programs cosponsored by the GLBT Historical Society and organized by J-Sei, a Japanese American community organization in Emeryville, in conjunction with its online exhibition "[Seen And Unseen: Queering Japanese American History Before 1945.](#)" This exhibition explores queerness in the Japanese American community in the first half of the twentieth century. Register online [here](#).

Workshop

Printmaking for Queer Social Justice

Friday, December 11

6:00–7:30 p.m.

Online program

Free | \$5 suggested donation



Join master printmaker Gabriela Martínez for a workshop on how printmaking can harness the power of visual language for social justice and activism. Participants will be introduced to the basics of printmaking using common, accessible materials. The workshop will begin by establishing a visual vocabulary using personal, political and culturally relevant symbols and slogans based on our online exhibition *Angela Davis: Outspoken*.

Upon registration, participants will be sent a recommended materials list, including household items and suggestions for affordable items that can be purchased. Additionally, participants will receive a recorded video introduction from Martínez. Because this event is a virtual, hands-on workshop featuring individual instruction, guidance and feedback, capacity is limited to 20 attendees. Register online [here](#).

Current Exhibitions

Performance, Protest & Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker

Online

Examine how rainbow flag creator Gilbert Baker blurred the lines between artist and activist, protester and performer.

50 Years of Pride

Online

This photography exhibition documents the evolution of San Francisco Pride over the past half century.

Labor of Love: The Birth of San Francisco Pride

Online

Learn how San Francisco forged the internationally renowned annual celebration that would come to be known as Pride.

AIDS Treatment Activism: A Bay Area Story

Online

Explore the rise of and growth of the treatment activism movement in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980s and 1990s.

Angela Davis: OUTspoken

Online

Rare posters and ephemera from a private collection highlight the journey of Black lesbian activist Angela Davis.

Reigning Queens: The Lost Photos of Roz Joseph

Online

Evocative color photographs depict San Francisco's epic drag and costume balls of the mid-1970s.

making history. together.

Become a part of history by making your year-end contribution at glbthistory.org/donate. Every donation made by December 31 will be matched, up to \$50,000, doubling your impact!

Visit Us & Online Resources

The archives are online-only until further notice, but archives staff members are still available to work with researchers; please contact us at reference@glbthistory.org.

Online exhibitions: Our online exhibitions are available here.

Online archives resources: Browse dozens of digital collections.

Upcoming events: More information about all of our online events.

Past events: Video footage of a large number of our past programs.

THE GLBT HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

Exhibitions & Programs

4127 18th St.

San Francisco, CA 94114

(415) 621-1107

www.glbthistory.org/museum

Temporarily closed; visit website for updates and reservations.

DR. JOHN P. DE CECCO ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Research & Public History Center

(415) 777-5455

www.glbthistory.org/archives

Temporarily online-only

[Donate](#)[Volunteer](#)[Join](#)

CREDITS. FEATURE: Screenshots of San Francisco ACT UP Oral History Project interviewees. FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Photo of Terry Beswick by Gareth Gooch. AT THE MUSEUM: Image detail from the article "Daring To Stay Alive," *Bay Area Reporter*, December 3, 1987; Ephemera Collection (PFLAG-PURP), GLBT Historical Society. EVENTS. Film Screening 12/1: A screenshot from Tina Takemoto's short film *Looking for Jiro*, courtesy of Maxwell Leung. Workshop 12/11: Portrait of Gabriela Martínez courtesy of same.

Editor & Communications Manager: Mark Sawchuk
Director of Development and Communications: Andrew Shaffer
Executive Director: Terry Beswick

Copyright © 2020 GLBT Historical Society

Back Issues

