

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXIII, Number 57, 5 December 1989 — Gay and lesbian CU student groups organize, mobilize in the age of AIDS [ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

Gay and lesbian CU student groups organize, mobilize in the age of AIDS

By Alex Roth

Nothing in history has played a bigger role in shaping gay life than AIDS in the 1980s. At Columbia and across the country, the deadly disease sent death and panic through the gay community and forced gays to make basic changes in how they live and love.

If AIDS caused a radical change at Columbia in gays' sexual and social patterns, it also helped give the gay community a unity and sense of collective purpose that it didn't have at the start of the decade. As a result of the disease, and for a number of other reasons, Columbia's gay community enters the 1990s as one of the campus's most outspoken and loudest campus voices.

But as the decade comes to a close, many gays and lesbians at Columbia say they still feel alienated from the administration, from campus heterosexuals and sometimes even from other gay students.

AIDS in the '80s had a radical effect on both how gay men at Columbia chose to have sex and who they chose to have sex with. The safe-sex movement was spawned in the gay com-

munity. In 1985—three years after the disease took its first life in San Francisco, California—Spectator interviews with 100 gay men on campus revealed a 50 percent reduction in anal intercourse, a 70 percent reduction in oral-anal sex, a 66 percent increase in the use of condoms and a 40 percent reduction in kissing.

“We can’t deny our sexuality, and I’m certainly not celibate, but I will not engage in anal sex,” said Paul, then 19 and a Columbia student, during an interview with Spectator in 1985.

A large number of gays at Columbia also said they no longer cruised bars looking for casual sex and placed more emphasis on monogamy. This coincided with the decline and eventual disappearance of New York City bathhouses, the steamy nightspots where gay men could meet to have anonymous sex with multiple partners.

According to many gays at Columbia, the AIDS epidemic also made it more difficult for them to come out of the closet. “It’s so hard to deal with your own sexuality, and on top of that to worry about disease,” one gay student said in the middle of the decade.

Making things more difficult was the rise in acts of anti-gay harassment, for which members of the gay community hold AIDS largely responsible. Last December, “Get the homo’s (sic) out of the kitchen you are encouraging AIDS die!” was scrawled on a comment card in Wien Dining Hall after a dining service employee kissed another male while on duty at the sandwich counter.

Last April, two members of the Columbia Gay and Lesbian Alliance, which recently changed its name to the Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay Coalition (LBGC), received death threats.

Ironically, the epidemic has helped give the gay community at Columbia something of a more vibrant life. “AIDS has

helped get a lot of people off their asses," says Roderick Dial, CC '89 and former CGLA chair. "It was proof of the strength that was there but that maybe was unrealized."

The decade has seen the birth of gay organizations at the Theological Seminary, at Teachers College and at the Law School as well as the growth of already existing organizations like the CGLA.

At the end of the 1970s only about 10 people attended regular CGLA meetings. By the middle of the decade the group had an active membership of more than 35, and Roderick says today the group is larger and more active than he's ever seen it before. Ian Tattenbaum, CC '90, an LBGC member, says many members joined because "they weren't willing to be gay activists, but they were willing to be AIDS activists."

As on other college campuses across the country, gays at Columbia mobilized to educate the public about AIDS and to pressure government to spend more money on AIDS research and treatment. The Columbia Gay Health Advocacy Project (CGHAP), created in 1985, is now a model for other colleges looking to start gay health awareness organizations. *The Essential AIDS Fact Book*, written by CGHAP and Columbia Health Services in 1987, today circulates nationwide and overseas.

The number of gay organizations have mushroomed at Columbia for other reasons as well. Women have become much more involved, especially in the last five years. CGLA was formed in 1983 when Barnard's lesbian and Columbia's gay organizations combined. But until recently women played a marginal role in the organization's affairs. Very few women held CGLA leadership positions, and campus participation in dances and other gay social events was overwhelmingly male.

"When I first got involved in CGLA it was about 75 percent male," Tattenbaum says. "Now it's over 50 percent female."

In 1987, a group of women who felt CGLA was indifferent to the needs of lesbians formed Women-Oriented Women (WOW), a lesbian social group whose membership now stands at about 50. The organization, WOW members say, has helped lesbians find an identity and a much better social life in the Columbia community.

"It gives you the feeling that you can make a difference," says Michelle Auerbach, BC '90.

Many gays and lesbians at Columbia say they now feel completely comfortable as homosexuals on campus. "Columbia is a great place to be a gay student. There's no campus in the country where I can have as good a social life as at Columbia," Tattenbaum says.

But others have said they still feel isolated from each other and from the University as a whole. Throughout the decade, many claim, the easy escape route of New York City made it relatively difficult for gays and lesbians to form a cohesive social network on campus. "Gays at other campuses have no other choice but to rely on the gay organizations on campus," says Mark Scheible, CC '91. "We're in the middle of a city. There's an external gay community that's wide and diverse."

Gay students have also said that the small, tightly knit campus makes it more difficult for closet homosexuals to come out because these gays are afraid everyone else will hear about it immediately.

Also, many gays say they still feel shunned by the University. For example, many point out, Columbia still has no standard procedure for disciplining students who commit acts of anti-gay harassment or violence. The LBGA recently wrote a letter to Spectator asserting that all the progress the gay community has made at Columbia has come despite "an unsympathetic and reluctant administration."

Still, in the 1980s the University made some significant concessions to the gay and lesbian community. Joint membership for couples at the gym and library was expanded last year to include gay couples. The gay alliance at Teachers College, which used to get all its money from CGLA, is now formally recognized and funded by Teachers College.

"The University has a better attitude now," says Thaddeus Grimes-Grucza, CC '90. "They realize they have to have a better attitude because they've seen consistent mobilization."

But Grimes-Grucza and others say Columbia still has a long way to go. The University still allows on-campus recruiting by the CIA as well as many businesses the LBGA says discriminate against gays.

"If a company that didn't hire women came to recruit at Columbia, you can imagine how long they'd last," Grimes-Grucza says.

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Roderick Dial, CC '89

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Members of the Columbia Gay and Lesbian Alliance (now the Columbia Lesbian Bisexual Gay Coalition) at a 1987 Washington, D.C. rally.