

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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AIDS AWARENESS MONTH

Campus AIDS Activism Continues to Evolve

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“It was like watching somebody moving toward a cliff, and there was nothing you could do.”

That’s how Laura Pinsky, BC ’68 and a longtime AIDS activist at Columbia, describes the early days of the AIDS epidemic. A lot has changed since the mid-1980s—AIDS is no longer regarded as the gay disease and treatments are available. But as the epidemic has faded to the back of cultural consciousness, the issue has largely fallen from the agendas of campus queer groups and student activists.

AIDS activism began at Columbia with the founding of the organization that would become the Gay Health Advocacy Project, which has provided information and support services regarding AIDS since the days when students knew little about HIV transmission or the treatment of related diseases, and when a diagnosis was tantamount to a death sentence.

“1986 to 1995 was a very sad, very intense, but very emotionally involved era for all of us at GHAP,” co-founder and director Laura Pinsky, BC ’68, said.

Pinsky arrived at Columbia Health Services in 1984, just as the mysterious and terrifying disease was beginning to ravage New York’s gay community. After counseling gay male students who were struggling to deal with the stigma and the lack of information on AIDS, she and graduate student Paul Douglas founded what would become GHAP.

The organization launched student support groups and recruited local doctors to treat students at rates Columbia health insurance could cover, a program that continues today. They were also approached by a specialist at St. Luke’s Hospital to find

participants for a medical study, making Columbia the first American university to participate in HIV antibody testing.

Many students were also part of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, which worked to increase resources available to AIDS patients. GHAP thus made patient education a priority at a time when general knowledge about HIV and AIDS was clouded by prejudice and fear.

“It was a maverick, groundbreaking program at the time,” Everybody Allied Against Homophobia co-president and GHAP advocate Ira Stup, GS, said. “GHAP was one of a kind, and unfortunately continues to be one of a kind.”

GHAP and the larger HIV/AIDS activist community were dogged by the deaths of friends, including Douglas, who died in 1995 while on the waiting list for a treatment that would mark a turning point in the epidemic. The hardest thing, Pinsky, was watching friends decline.

Through the mid-'80s, the lack of treatment options was so absolute that even HIV testing sometimes seemed like opening a Pandora's box.

“We didn't necessarily discourage people from getting tested, but we encouraged them to think through all the consequences,” Pinsky said. “At the time, you knew it was a deadly disease. We thought people had a right to know ... but there wasn't anything medically that you could do.”

That changed with the emergence of medicines that could fight pneumocystis pneumonia, which was at the time the leading cause of AIDS-related deaths. With treatments finally available, GHAP placed a greater emphasis on HIV testing. As prognoses improved

throughout the '90s and the flood of deaths slowed, the project's role on campus shifted from triage to broad-based prevention initiatives and patient assistance.

Today GHAP provides free, confidential HIV testing, and trained student volunteer advocates offer peer counseling four days a week.

GHAP also works with campus queer groups, whose members have come of age seeing AIDS as a manageable illness.

"I think everyone on the CQA executive board would agree that this is a problem," Columbia Queer Alliance President Jeanette Clark, CC '10, said of the decline of AIDS-related discussion among LGBT youth. "We recognize the fact that this discussion has been pushed to the wayside in favor of other things that seemed more pressing."

Pinsky attributed this shift both to the improvement of responses to the epidemic and to students' lack of personal connections to the disease.

"Students now don't know someone with HIV, or if they do, it's an uncle or someone else older," Pinsky said. "It creates a distinction between older and younger people in the gay community."

"I think that a lot of that stems from the fact that, really, a whole generation of gay men was just wiped out," Stup said. "It's still a very present living legacy for that generation, and it just hasn't passed on to us. It's hard for people my age to really grasp how recent it was."

In an attempt to mitigate this gap, Pinsky said, GHAP is launching a mentoring program to connect current LGBT students with

older gay professionals.

Many also tied the drop-off in AIDS-related queer activism to a change in what it means to be gay at Columbia.

"The queer communities on campus have really gotten their acts together, I'd say, over the last ten years," said GHAP coordinator Daniel Chiarilli, who is pursuing a Ph.D. in musicology. "But when I first started as an advocate, people would come to GHAP as one of the most visible places to be gay."

"On our campus, almost all the students we've tested positive have been men who have sex with men," Pinsky said. "It's not a gay disease, but on our campus, our strongest outreach is to the gay community because that's where the disease is."

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This article is the seventh part in a seven-part series to recognize AIDS Awareness Month. The series's fifth article can be found in last week's *Eye* magazine.



Photo by Michael S. Pinsky

INCREASING AWARENESS ■ The Student Global AIDS Campaign hosted an event at Campo last Thursday. The gathering was intended to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS, and all proceeds from drinks went to the Global Fund, which combats AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria.