UNHEARD VOICES

Stories of LGBT History

Interview Transcript

David Barr *has been working as an AIDS activist for over 25 years. Recently, he came to StoryCorps to talk about how the disease changed the gay community in New York City during the early 1980s, and what it was like to fight a disease that nobody fully understood.*

David Barr: I was there at the epicenter of the epidemic in the United States, a member of the hardest hit community in the city. A lot of people were sick, people were dying constantly. We all felt like we were living in a war zone.

We were working day and night, and people would die, you know, close friends would die. And there was no time to really stop and take it in and process it. Somebody else was sick, you know. There was another action to do. There was another piece of work to get done. It wasn't like, oh, I have a job in AIDS and then I go home and I go do something. It was our life.

Prior to AIDS there was a gay movement. It was not a large movement. It wasn't a very politicized community. Here in New York, the largest gay community in the world, we had no gay rights bill passed. We didn't have the political clout and we didn't have enough people in the community interested.

AIDS politicized the gay community. It created the organizations that became very powerful and politically savvy. The response by the gay community to AIDS is a historic response of any American community in response to a crisis. It involved hundreds of thousands of people coming together, creating organizations, helping one another, really overcoming incredible adversity as individuals and as communities to address a problem.

And in doing so, we changed the way that society looks at gay people because people started realizing, oh, that's my brother whose dying, I can't really hate him anymore because I'm…I'm sad that he's dying. Or it's my friend or it's my co-worker.

People dying of AIDS was the first important step to changing people's attitudes about gayness and about gay people.

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