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A LEGACY OF COMMUNITY & MOURNING:  
AIDS & HIV IN CENTRAL FLORIDA, 1983-1993

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
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## ABSTRACT

Given the primacy of Florida, and in particular Orlando, as an urban center with an above average rate of AIDS and HIV, this study examines how the outbreak of a deadly disease can affect a community. Complicating the response to this scourge, those who were most at-risk were marginalized groups such as those in the LGBTQ community, drug users, and often people of color. As a result, those who occupied positions of political power felt little incentive to curb the epidemic and mocked it by deeming it “the gay disease.” As a result of neglect and the lack of investment in scientific and medical research to better understand the epidemiological contours of this deadly disease, its growth and spread were exacerbated.

Given the significant social stigma associated with AIDS, an analysis of the epidemic must be examined both an epidemiological as well as a social phenomenon. In Orlando and elsewhere, the refusal of the government and institutions to adequately address the AIDS epidemic, some people in the community formed grassroots organizations to help find relief for their community, family and friends. Whereas in previous generations, separation from the mainstream society was an explicit objective of many gay activists, in this era the gay community worked toward forming an inclusive coalition out of necessity to combat AIDS. Eventually, this effort forced the broader population and political establishment to begin taking decisive action.

Eventually, declining rates of infection suggest that the resources invested in this effort, including scientific research and public information campaigns, worked. The public became more knowledgeable about AIDS and HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS, even became manageable to the point that it no longer the equivalent to a death sentence; however, the AIDS epidemic

left a legacy on communities across the country and globe. This analysis of the experience of Orlando, Florida, illustrates the effect of its aftermath; grief and mourning remains an ever-present reminder of this dark chapter in this community's history. Further, the grassroots organizations, strategies, and resources developed out of necessity during the 1980s remained and became important pillars of the community. The response to the PULSE Nightclub mass shooting that occurred decades after the height of the AIDS epidemic demonstrated the persistence and importance of these community organizations to the Orlando community.

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## INTRODUCTION

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome, or more commonly AIDS, has long been an area of interest among scholars across disciplines. Since the Center for Disease Control published its first article on AIDS/HIV in 1981, the virus has claimed the lives of approximately 35 million people globally with 78 million people still living with the virus today according to the World Health Organization.<sup>1</sup> AIDS results from the contracting of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and is transmitted typically through blood and bodily fluids.<sup>2</sup> Once inside a human body, HIV wages an attack on white blood cells, the body's primary means of protection against harmful viruses.<sup>3</sup> It continues to reduce the number of white blood cells within the body rendering it vulnerable to ailments that could otherwise be overcome. Without treatment to bolster the body's weakened defense mechanisms, the body weakens until these symptoms ultimately prove to be fatal.

The AIDS epidemic first began making headlines after a series of eerily similar cases of a rare form of pneumonia arose in five different gay men living in Los Angeles between 1980 and 1981. For the CDC and the broader medical community, these five cases prompted an inquiry into what would soon become one of the leading causes of death globally.<sup>4</sup> Following the ascendancy of Ronald Reagan to the nation's highest office and subsequent dominance of social conservatism in American politics at the onset of the decade, HIV/AIDS was initially treated by

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<sup>1</sup> "Global Health Observatory (GHO) data on HIV/AIDS", accessed on September 20, 2015, <http://www.who.int/gho/hiv/en>.

<sup>2</sup> K.E. Nye and J.M Parkin, *HIV and AIDS*. (Herndon: BIOS Scientific Publishers Limited, 1994), 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Nikola Bulled, *Prescribing HIV Prevention: Bringing Culture into Global Health Communication* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2015), 20.

many within the media and political arena as a social plague resulting from immoral behavior.<sup>5</sup> This construction of AIDS revealed more about the sexual attitudes of the era than it does about AIDS as a medical condition. The perception of HIV/AIDS as “the gay disease” was common among those in the political class and media, which ultimately created a set of conditions that allowed AIDS to develop into an epidemic and spread with little recourse.<sup>6</sup>

While the implications of such a widespread public health crisis are vast and far-reaching, focusing on the AIDS epidemic within the analytical framework of a national tragedy can obscure the impact that the AIDS epidemic had on local communities. For this reason, my research focuses on the AIDS crisis in central Florida and what role it has played in the evolution of our LGBTQ community’s cultural identity and its response to this tragedy.

Numerous works deal with various facets of this epidemic from the macro-level social, political, and medical implications of HIV /AIDS to the emotional toll it has taken on communities across the country. Several oral history programs have been created in different communities across the globe which allow for the unique perspectives of doctors, patients, and those afflicted to shed light on the immense human suffering that inevitably results from a disease such as this. Given that numerous other case studies are detailing the history of AIDS in other major cities with relatively large LGBT communities, Orlando is long overdue for a similar study. While there have been significant studies focusing on AIDS and LGBT life in central Florida which

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the treatment of the AIDS epidemic within the realm of American politics, R. Anthony Slagle’s essay titled “Scapegoating and Political Discourse: Representative Robert Dornan’s Legislation of Morality Through HIV/AIDS” details the perception of AIDS as retribution for moral transgressions.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M, Fox *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 253.



have proven to be helpful with my research, a historiographical gap detailing this chapter of history remains. To help satisfy this historiographical gap, there needs to be a study that teases together the range of experiences had by those in Orlando with the significant steps taken by community activists to help curb the havoc being wrought by AIDS during this time.

One of the earliest works that chronicle in-depth the tragic loss that characterized this era for so many and details the negligence on behalf of public health officials is Randy Shilts' *And The Band Played on: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*. Shilts employs his investigative skills to document the accounts of an array of different characters from the earliest diagnoses of Grethe Rask, a doctor working in Africa who contracted the disease, up to the death of actor Rock Hudson.<sup>7</sup> Shilts focuses much of his attention on Gaetan Dugas, a Canadian flight attendant referred to as "Patient Zero." Shilts contends it was due to Dugas' promiscuity that AIDS was first introduced into the United States and allowed for the disease to spread so rapidly. While this claim of Dugas as the infamous Patient Zero has largely been discredited since the publication of Shilts' work, the author's resounding indictment of those in power failing to curb the spread of AIDS remains intact and an integral part of AIDS history.<sup>8</sup>

Daniel M. Fox and Elizabeth Fee were also at the forefront of AIDS scholarship early on and have since published multiple works dealing with AIDS history as well as the difficulties facing historians who write about AIDS. *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, on which Fox and Fee served as editors, collects essays that detail the nature of historical writing on AIDS and both the

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<sup>7</sup> Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987) xiii, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Shilts' claims regarding "Patient Zero" have been roundly criticized since this work's publication by many, notably by Douglas Crimp in *Melancholia and Moralism* which can be found in my bibliography as well as many epidemiologists.

usefulness as well as the inherent problems historians face by drawing on comparable epidemiological events of the past. In the introduction to *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, Fee and Fox discuss the historiography of AIDS contending that “arguing by analogy, historians helped to encourage wishful thinking: they helped to create a story about the epidemic as a time-limited incursion of a virulent plague.”<sup>9</sup> In their follow up titled *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease*, Fee and Fox edit a collection which further teases out this theme with a collection of essays from scholars from across academia adding insight to both the national as well as the international response to AIDS. Taken together, Fee and Fox employ this set of articles to call for a more complete history of AIDS and that in doing so, we can and should view AIDS through the prism of contemporary politics.<sup>10</sup>

Two important case studies that rely on major cities as their sites of inquiry are Tamar W. Carroll’s *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Anti-poverty, and Feminist Activism* and Michelle Cochrane’s *When AIDS Began: San Francisco and the Making of an Epidemic*. In *Mobilizing New York*, Carroll examines how disparate social activist organizations that champion different racial justice issues, women’s rights and LGBTQ rights issues recognized the interrelatedness of their respective campaigns. In doing so, these organizations decided to join forces to combat homophobia that was prevalent in New York in the 1980s. Carroll’s approach is novel for her ability to show how ordinary people from different backgrounds were able to organize them-

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox, “The Contemporary Historiography of AIDS” in *The Journal of Social History*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter, 1989), pp. 303-314.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox, *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 11.

selves and effect change. This work, for its focus on city, social movements and the lives of ordinary people, in many ways, will serve in part as a blueprint for my research. In *When AIDS Began*, Cochrane similarly follows in the tradition of employing AIDS oral histories to paint a picture of the fear and anguish sweeping through San Francisco as the early AIDS cases were piling up. Cochrane's argument is strongest when she draws attention to the ideological thrust of the media and the AIDS researchers who presented bodies of knowledge under the guise being neutral but were actually reflections of the societal fear of homosexuality.

Drawing on the aforementioned works as well as others within the broader AIDS historiography, this research is another step toward capturing *how* people responded to the AIDS epidemic at its height. The form and content of memories surrounding this time are considered within the larger context of the AIDS/HIV and LGBTQ historical narratives. Specifically, I focus on Orlando as the hub of a prominent LGBTQ community and frame it within broader AIDS historical narratives to understand how the history of struggle in the face of adversity impacts the makeup of that community today.<sup>11</sup>

Three primary questions have guided my research process. First, I examine on a local level how a disease shrouded in mystery developed into an epidemic that could no longer be ignored. In other words, I analyze how the convergence of social fears and conditions during this time created a set of circumstances, which ultimately hastened the spread of HIV/AIDS. Second, I trace the evolution of the politics and local activism surrounding this issue on a grassroots level as well as nationally. I examine how approaches to activism and organizing strategies changed in

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<sup>11</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (Feb. 1992).

response to the onset of this public health crisis. Third, I look into the response to the AIDS epidemic on an institutional level including what local and state governments did to combat this issue. I scrutinize the coordination between the public and private sectors on this issue and how the medical establishment dealt with the increased stress on their healthcare systems.

This research project aims to satisfy a historiographical gap in AIDS scholarship by analyzing the impact of AIDS on Orlando's LGBTQ community. By focusing on the AIDS epidemic in Orlando during "the AIDS decade," I believe unique insights into the cultural identity of Orlando's LGBTQ community and by extension, Orlando, in general, can be gained.<sup>12</sup>

Through an examination of the scope of this epidemic in its early stages, from its onset in 1983, the year Orlando saw its first AIDS case to 1993, the year that AIDS rates first began to steady, a better understanding of how Central Florida fared relative to the rest of the country. Further, by understanding the scale of how deeply Orlando was impacted by HIV/AIDS, a sense of proportionality of both the community's response as well as the local and state government's response can be recognized. An analysis of local LGBTQ and mainstream periodicals provides insight into how the local response developed as the epidemic escalated. Taken in concert with accounts of local AIDS activists and the existing historiography on this topic, a sense of both the human cost of this chapter of history as well as the sheer resilience of those within the community can be understood. In addition, by assessing the changing strategies of LGBTQ political activists in reaction to the weak response to this public health crisis, we can begin to see a parallel between early grassroots AIDS activism and the battle for other LGBTQ civil rights down the line.

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<sup>12</sup> Michelle Hoffman, "AIDS: Solving the Molecular Puzzle" in *American Scientist*, Vol. 82, No. 2 (March-April 1994), 171-177.

Focusing on the LGBTQ community is critical because in the mid-1980s, as more information surrounding HIV/AIDS became known, it was clear that those who were most at risk for contracting HIV were homosexual men, men of color, and intravenous drug users.<sup>13</sup> As a result, society's preexisting animus toward these social groups was exacerbated significantly creating a segment of society that was perceived as the "dangerous other".<sup>14</sup> The social toxicity that developed around this issue made many public officials hesitant to address the crisis in a meaningful way. Such conditions stymied research and needlessly exacerbated the epidemic. As a result, gay communities and allies alike around the nation had to deal not only with the disease itself but also the stigma associated with this disease. The initial failure to launch an adequate response in a timely manner had tremendous consequences on the scope of this crisis. Prompted by the broader mainstream community's failure to address this public health crisis, HIV/AIDS activism during this time has had a lasting impact on gay communities around the country and is central to understanding the evolution of LGBTQ issues in the late twentieth century.

Orlando represents a unique opportunity for a project such as this for many reasons. Located deep in Central Florida, which has its own troubled history with the treatment of the LGBTQ community and minority groups in general, Orlando is currently considered by many as one of the foremost cities for gay life in the country.<sup>15</sup> As such, certain fundamental questions

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<sup>13</sup> Hung Fan, Ross F. Conner, and Luis Villarreal, *AIDS: Science and Society* (Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2011), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Michael C. Clatts, and Kevin M. Mutchler, "AIDS and the Dangerous Other: Metaphors of Sex and Deviance in the Representation of Disease" in *Medical Anthropology*, 105-114.

<sup>15</sup> Charlie Hogan, "Pride Courage and Memories," GLBT History Museum, April 14, accessed October 7, 2015, [http://glbthistorymuseum.com/joomla25/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=39:memories-by-charlie-hogan&catid=9:general&Itemid=184&lang=en](http://glbthistorymuseum.com/joomla25/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=39:memories-by-charlie-hogan&catid=9:general&Itemid=184&lang=en).

about how such a vibrant, resilient gay community came to develop in Orlando in the wake of its complicated history.

Given Orlando's rich LGBTQ history, it is uniquely qualified for a micro-level investigation into the damage unleashed during the early years of the AIDS/HIV epidemic. By focusing specifically on the AIDS crisis in Orlando, this study clearly illustrates how the convergence of political intransigence, public fears of non-normative sexualities and bewilderment among those in the medical establishment hastened this tragedy within what would become one of the strongest LGBTQ-friendly cities in the country.

Following my analysis, Orlando managed the AIDS epidemic in ways that were both extraordinary as well as congruent with other urban centers across the country as well. In chapter one, I describe the climate of LGBTQ life both in the country at large but also in Orlando specifically and how the historical tradition of marginalizing the very communities that would be most deeply impacted by AIDS ultimately exacerbated their plight. Further, I detail the methods, organizing tactics and emergence of a network of local grassroots organizations that emerged to combat AIDS and HIV. The social epidemic represented to many a growing stigma surrounding disease and non-heteronormative sexualities deemed a threat to many within the rise of the particular brand of right-wing Christian politics that was on the rise during this time.

In chapter two, I describe the role that certain national, local, and state institutions eventually played detailing a sweeping surveillance plan put in place by the CDC as well as important legislative initiatives that were successful in securing funds for AIDS/HIV issues. In addition, I describe some of the non-physical symptoms experienced by many involved in different aspects of the AIDS epidemic including those within the psychological and emotional realm. Ultimately,

I argue that due to stories such as Ryan White's, which appealed to the nation's inner humanity, communities around the country began to treat AIDS victims with a sense of dignity for the first time. The significant growth in AIDS-related legislation began to correlate with the decreasing numbers of AIDS-related deaths.

Finally, in chapter three I argue that Orlando's experience with AIDS and HIV during this period was one of tremendous anguish for so many and that the very process of mourning became an integral part of the cultural identity of the LGBTQ community. The ever-present sense of grief throughout the community was accompanied by a simultaneous sense of duty and activism displayed in protests such as A Day Without Art and others which I describe. Further, I detail how one of the most important and lasting legacies of the AIDS epidemic in Orlando is the grassroots organizations started during this time and their proven resilience. It is so many of these groups that have outlived the worst days of this dark period that have remained to become important pillars for the entire community and emerged as beacons of light when darkness emerged down the line.

## CHAPTER 1: GAY LIFE IN CENTRAL FLORIDA, THE ONSET OF AN EPIDEMIC AND THE GRASSROOTS

In 2015, after completing a nearly ten-year study into the leading causes of death among Americans across the United States, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) published their findings. Contained within this report was the bleak reality that deaths resulting from HIV related illnesses in the state of Florida ranked highest in the nation.<sup>16</sup> Further, the CDC published a report in 2011 listing the fifteen American cities with the highest rates of HIV infection; Florida claimed a total of three of those slots and the city of Orlando ranked at number eleven.<sup>17</sup> The dismal state of Florida's long-standing fight against HIV/AIDS has deep roots. Orlando, which represents an important focal point in Florida's broader struggle to combat this public health crisis, has a history that uniquely qualifies the city for an in-depth inquiry into the community's grassroots response to this public health crisis - one which has strained the city's public health facilities and left a legacy of the mourning in the community.

In this chapter, I detail the major social, cultural and political currents that have played a significant role in creating the unique set of circumstances that has allowed for the AIDS/HIV public health crisis in Orlando and central Florida to reach the level of severity that it ultimately did. To accomplish this, I will detail some of the important events, institutions, as well as individuals that have helped play a role in shaping the character of Orlando's LGBTQ community.

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<sup>16</sup> Francis P. Boscoe, PhD and Eva Pradhan MPH, "The Most Distinctive Causes of Death by State, 2001-2010," *Preventing Chronic Disease*, Volume 12, May 14, 2015, accessed on June 5, 2015, [http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2015/14\\_0395.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2015/14_0395.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Downs, Ray, "HIV/AIDS Kills People in Florida More Than Anywhere Else," *Broward Palm Beach New Times*, Monday, May 18, 2015, accessed on June 5, 2015, <http://www.broward-palmbeach.com/news/hiv-aids-kills-people-in-florida-more-than-anywhere-else-6978875>.



In addition, I will address the LGBTQ community's history in central Florida and particularly how it fits into the broader history of gay men and women living in the South. In doing so, I will illustrate the particularities of this growing minority within the community and the circumstances that eventually culminated in such a tragic public health crisis.

Ultimately, I argue that the response Orlando forged to the AIDS epidemic assumed the form that it did because of broader societal conditions in place at the time. The marginal status of gay men and women in society meant that elected officials and those in positions of power abdicated their responsibility to mount a legitimate effort combating the epidemic in its early stages. Thus, the brunt of the effort fell on the backs of non-elected officials and average members of the community such as nurses and teachers. Further complicating the efforts of AIDS activists was the ascendancy of a particular brand of right-wing conservative politics in which the LGBTQ community was deemed toxic and threatening. As a result, grassroots answers to institutional deficiencies were crucial and Orlando represents a unique microcosm of this broader trend occurring across the country.

While understanding the biological and physical implications of any illness at the center of an epidemic are integral to completing a study such as this, it is also critically important to understand the social nature of illness as well. It is particularly important to understand how social attitudes perpetuated the hysteria surrounding AIDS and HIV during this time given the stigma surrounding homosexuality and the social fissures it exacerbated. More information on this aspect of AIDS in Orlando and its impact on the cultural identity of the city's LGBTQ community will be provided in the coming pages. Over the years since this crisis began ravaging communities across the country, there has been a preponderance of macro-level analyses into the social

forces at work that ultimately hastened and inflamed the AIDS/HIV crisis across the country; however, in the following pages I will highlight some of the forces unique to Orlando and central Florida that have coalesced and resulted in the situation that this community reckoned with – a situation that was as complex as it was mysterious and as devastating as it was historic.

Orlando's LGBTQ community has a rich, vibrant history dating back many decades. That said, however, despite the sizable population of gay-owned businesses, recreation leagues, and community organizations in Orlando and central Florida, the LGBTQ community's status as a minority group has made it the target of some of America's oldest traditions: persecution, discrimination, and violence.<sup>18</sup> With scant institutional or structural resources available to the LGBTQ community to combat the many difficult issues faced in the pre-AIDS era, non-heteronormative members of the community were forced to discover and create their own institutions and frameworks for tackling adversity. As I will detail in the coming pages, prior to establishing proper health clinics and community centers that cater to this particular demographic, the gay nightlife scene became an essential organizing hub for activists to gather, strategize, and disseminate information. These institutions, organizing principles, and general approaches to community building were foundational to the strategies later employed to address the public health crisis characterized by HIV/AIDS early on. While this situation was far from ideal, it was a foundation to build upon and one would that would ultimately precede the grassroots organizations that arose to combat the health crisis that was would ravage the gay community.

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<sup>18</sup> Orlando's LGBT Chamber of Commerce Metropolitan Business Association today has a registry of over 250 LGBT businesses. More information can be found at: <http://mbaorlando.org/history/>.

Before the outbreak of HIV/AIDS, many gay men and women, fearful of suffering the consequences of a general population that has yet to arrive at a point of broad acceptance of non-heteronormative sexualities, convened in secrecy to prevent their private proclivities from disrupting their family and work lives. After the Palace Club, the first exclusively gay bar opened in Orlando in 1969, more and more bars and nightclubs that catered to the LGBTQ community began to emerge and slowly drew gay men and women out from the shadows.<sup>19</sup> Further, as Orlando's gay community began to develop a distinctive nightlife scene of its own, these spaces initially constructed to allow the LGBTQ community a safe space to drink, dance, and fraternize ultimately came to serve a much larger purpose.

While many did not want Orlando's gay nightlife scene to house the structures around which the LGBTQ community organized, given the lack of other conventional resources available to the community, bars became important hubs for organizing, disseminating information and eventually activism. On this matter, David Bain, President of the GLBT Museum of Central Florida states, "At the time, the community was trying so hard to have something that wasn't related around the bars, but the bars were the only way that you could get the information out. People didn't even like to get on mailing lists."<sup>20</sup> This sense of fear expressed by Bain is by no means an outlier. The fear of retribution among members of the LGBTQ community early on was pervasive and further isolated the community in many ways from their broader community

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<sup>19</sup> Gourarie, Chava. "Since the 60s, Orlando gay bars have catalyzed a community." *Time Line*, June 13, 2016, accessed on February 18, 2020, <https://timeline.com/since-the-60s-orlando-gay-bars-have-catalyzed-a-community-713ee83d3b09>.

<sup>20</sup> Manes, Billy. "Uncovering Orlando's Gay History Isn't Easy... But Someone's Gotta Do It." *Orlando Weekly*, October 12, 2006, accessed on August 8, 2016, <http://www.orlandoweekly.com/orlando/uncovering-orlandos-gay-history-isnt-easy-but-someones-gotta-do-it/Content?oid=2274743>.

at large. Before going into full detail about central Florida's gay nightlife scene and its parallel history of functioning as an organizational framework for this community, it is necessary to briefly detail the history of legislative measures taken to lawfully discriminate against homosexual men and women to illustrate the harsh climate Florida's gay men and women had long been accustomed to.

As the push to restrict the rights of the LGBTQ community in favor of conservative Christian ideas and traditional family values picked up steam during this time (as it would continue to do in the following decade), so too did the push back from the post-Stonewall era of gay rights activists. The Stonewall Riots of 1969, considered by many scholars as the birth of the modern gay rights movement, helped set into motion a series of political battles between gay rights activists and traditionally conservative Christian fundamentalists which characterized much of the culture wars of the decade leading up to the first diagnosis of AIDS in 1981. This battle manifested itself in a variety of different ways in central Florida as well as across the country. Central Florida saw a number of organizations arise that catered specifically to the LGBTQ community. These organizations ranged from gay bars and nightclubs to recreation leagues and gay rights activist organizations. It is important at this point to highlight a few key organizations for the outsized role they ultimately played once the AIDS epidemic began taking its physical, emotional, and even symbolic toll on the community in Orlando and central Florida.

The term AIDS did not become a part of the lexicon until 1982; however, cases of Kaposi's Sarcoma (KS) and Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia (PCP) first began to emerge in Florida in 1980.<sup>21</sup> *The Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, a weekly briefing of sorts detailing developments in the world of epidemiology published by the CDC, confirmed that by July of 1981, there were a total of 108 confirmed cases of Kaposi's Sarcoma and Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia – two opportunistic infections linked to the eventual onset of AIDS. By the end of 1981, Florida would claim eight known cases of Kaposi's Sarcoma with that number increasing by a factor of ten the following year increasing exponentially for years to come.<sup>22</sup>

Orlando's first medically confirmed AIDS diagnosis was first reported in March of 1983 and became the subject of experimental treatment in Washington D.C. at the National Institute of Health (NIH). A thirty-two-year-old man who identified as gay was first diagnosed with PCP as well as KS before being transferred to NIH with the federal government paying \$500,000 for his radical treatment process.<sup>23</sup> By March there were three confirmed cases in this and that number had doubled by May.<sup>24</sup> With the whole nation's rate of AIDS/HIV infection increasing at a rapid rate, the ominous reality of this mysterious plague further highlighted the need to tackle this disease from a medical, social, emotional and even spiritual angle.

Following the first reported cases of AIDS in central Florida and as more cases began to accumulate, treatment of the disease faced a multitude of problems; the local press argued that

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<sup>21</sup> "Opportunistic Infections and Kaposi's Sarcoma among Haitians in the United States," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, July 9, 1982

<sup>22</sup> Morrison, Liz. "HIV-AIDS in Palm Beach County," *Palm Beach Post*, February 14, 2000, 17, accessed on August 16, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/130347076/>.

<sup>23</sup> Wesley, Jay. "Orlando Man Studied in AIDS Research," *New Direction*, March 1983.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

the community was “powerless.”<sup>25</sup> Across the medical fields, researchers were underfunded and desperately grappled with the AIDS crisis searching for answers in an environment saturated with misinformation. This combination of circumstances not only stifled progress but also encouraged opportunistic “quacks” to offer false hopes through ineffective products aimed at capitalizing on the fear and desperation of countless AIDS patients in central Florida and across the country.<sup>26</sup> Despite the vast amounts of misinformation dominating the AIDS discourse in the media and beyond, peer-reviewed medical journals had a difficult time countering this issue given how little was known about AIDS during this time. Central Florida Physician and AIDS researcher Dr. Jeffrey Goodgame describes this issue. Goodgame asserts, “a magazine article is often 18 months old before it is published in a medical journal – we need information that is 6 months old.”<sup>27</sup> The inability by the medical community to keep up the rapidly changing developments surrounding AIDS underscored the uphill battle medical researchers faced in their attempts to ascertain and share relevant information about a previously unknown disease.

The urgent plea for action and heightened attention focused on the AIDS crisis was pervasive across central Florida and the country. The increasing hysteria surrounding the newly emerging “gay plague” in many ways inflamed some of the social tensions of the time but in other ways created a set of circumstances for the unlikely cooperation among disparate elements

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<sup>25</sup> Burns, Diane Hubbard. “AIDS – Trying to Contain the Tragedy,” *Orlando Sentinel*, November 17, 1986. accessed on August 2, 2015: <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/orlandosentinel/docview/276957437/fulltext/37BAEC5600BE437CPQ/4?accountid=10003>.

<sup>26</sup> Cooke, Robert. “In AIDS Age, New Quacks Peddle, Prey,” *Orlando Sentinel*, June 2, 1987. accessed on August 2, 2015: <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/orlandosentinel/docview/277016706/37BAEC5600BE437CPQ/13?accountid=10003>.

<sup>27</sup> “AIDS Gives Rise To Some Unlikely Coalitions,” *Orlando Sentinel*, November 27, 1988 <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/orlandosentinel/docview/277359439/ED09457C913647B6PQ/5?accountid=10003>.

of the community. With such a concentration of gay men and women active in politics and business in the greater Orlando area during the time that the area's first AIDS case was reported, the LGBTQ community represented a substantial portion of the overall population as well as a major voting constituency for the city's political class. As a result, local and state representatives faced increasing pressure to take a position on how best to deal with this public health crisis.

Orlando Mayor William Frederick, elected in 1980, ran his campaign championing the slogan "One Orlando" which sought to present a sense of unity among Orlando's diverse citizenry; however, as questions regarding his administration's response to AIDS began to bombard the mayor's office, the hollowness underlying this campaign slogan became apparent. On this front, Frederick, despite empirical evidence to the contrary stated, "In my opinion, there has been no history of systematic persecution of any group in this community... I believe that sufficient state and federal laws exist at the present time to ensure the continuation of this attitude."<sup>28</sup> As a result, a chasm emerged between Mayor Frederick, who oversaw an annual city budget of \$90 million, and the LGBTQ community, who perceived Frederick's administration's response to the AIDS crisis not only as insufficient but devastating to their community.<sup>29</sup>

Concurrent with the election of Mayor Frederick, a fundamental renegotiation of the concept of morality was taking place across the country at large. This tug of war of ideas had implications for the national political landscape and culture in general but also specifically for the

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<sup>28</sup> Wesley, Jay. "Frederick Sends Mixed Signals: Mayor Claims One Orlando Includes Gay Community," *New Direction*, March 1983, 15.

<sup>29</sup>Blumenstyk, Goldie. "Frederick's Budget Plan More of The Same." *The Orlando Sentinel* (Orlando), July 14, 1987. July 14, 1987. accessed April 6, 2016. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/southeastnews/docview/277031676/34A577669A3241B2PQ/11?accountid=10003>.

safety of non-heteronormative members of the community. The status of gay men and women in central Florida as the “Other” and their relegation to the cultural margins is not unique to this location and in fact has a long tradition in Florida and the South more broadly. For decades, Florida’s legislative bodies have systematically strived to identify, persecute, and scourge this community of otherwise hardworking and law-abiding gay citizens.<sup>30</sup> While Florida has had laws criminalizing sodomy and other socially undesirable proclivities on the books since the mid-nineteenth century, the legal assault on homosexuality reached new heights during the Cold War era. Given heightened anxiety on a national level surrounding fears of Communism and Communist infiltrators in the country, homosexual men and women became targets for much of the federal intelligence community’s ire. Homosexual men and women were seen by many within the intelligence community and medical disciplines as psychologically disturbed, pathologically compromised and morally suspect.<sup>31</sup> Given this perception, homosexuals were considered threats to national security and treated as such. This legally mandated culture of homophobia and bigotry permeated federal agencies and trickled down into the states, which implemented their own set of discriminatory laws.<sup>32</sup> Further, this assault on the rights and dignity of sexual minorities

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<sup>30</sup> In a series of articles titled “the problem of Othering: Towards inclusiveness and Belonging,” John A. Powell and Stephen Medendorp offer helpful definition of othering as “a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis, Gregory B. “Lifting the Ban on Gays in the Civil Service: Federal Policy toward Gay and Lesbian Employees since the Cold War,” *Public Administration Review* Vol. 57, No. 5 (Sep. – Oct., 1997), pp. 387-395.

<sup>32</sup> For more information on the systematic persecution and homosexuals employed by the Federal government, see David K. Johnson’s *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, University of Chicago Press, 2004.



helped establish a precedent that had a ripple effect for decades to come which became particularly acute at the onset of the 1980s when the relationship between the gay community and the government became increasingly crucial.

A number of state and federal legislative initiatives together codified into law the criminalization of homosexuality. This legal assault was multifaceted and worked to reduce the rights of LGBTQ men and women in their public lives as well as within the privacy of their own homes. This had profound consequences for countless individuals both personally and professionally. Discriminatory laws targeting sexual minorities in Florida have been a constant reality dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century but for the purposes of this study, a brief analysis of some of the more contemporary anti-gay legislation is necessary for it is such legal precedents that ultimately had a subsequent impact on the scope, breadth, and response to the AIDS/HIV crisis.

One of the first manifestations of the backlash against the newly asserted sense of LGBTQ identity across the country took place in south Florida in the city of Miami in 1971. The political outfit Save Our Children, fronted by Anita Bryant, led a crusade to defeat a piece of legislation aimed at protecting people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.<sup>33</sup> Despite fervent pushback from gay rights activists, Bryant was successful in her goal of repealing the ordinance, which had implications not only for the LGBTQ community in Miami but in the entirety of the state and beyond as well.<sup>34</sup> On the heels of the successful anti-gay campaign efforts of the Save the Children organization, Florida Governor Reuben Askew signed into law a

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<sup>33</sup> Ghaziani, Amin. *The Dividends of Dissent: How Conflict and Culture Work in Lesbian and Gay Marches on Washington*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 34.

<sup>34</sup> Fejes, Fred. *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's Debate on Homosexuality*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 110.

measure that allowed for the prevention of same-sex couples from adopting children based on their sexual orientation as well as outlawed the legal recognition of same sex marriage in the state.<sup>35</sup> While this assault on the dignity of homosexual men and women was not uncommon in the United States during this time, both the symbolism as well as the practical implications of such measures were increasingly significant given their timing shortly before the outbreak of the first officially diagnosed cases of AIDS just a few short years away.

Coinciding with the outbreak of AIDS and the disproportionate impact it was having on the gay community nationally was the rise of public figures such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell – two figures who promoted a fundamentalist Christian view of the world that demonized homosexuality and a progressive worldview. The legitimization and normalization of a worldview that is outwardly homophobic, one which cast gay people as perverts and claims AIDS is retribution for society's acceptance of homosexuality was not without consequences. It certainly was conducive to and concurrent with the election of Ronald Reagan as president of the United States in 1980.<sup>36</sup> As the threat of AIDS became increasingly dire and those succumbing to the illness were being actively marginalized as a result of the newfound prominence of those on the Christian right, the ripple effect across the country had disastrous implications for the response to AIDS by local, state, and federal government organs.

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<sup>35</sup> "Askew Signs Bill to Ban Gay Marriage," *Boca Raton Times*, June 9, 1977, accessed on September 3, 2016, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1291&dat=19770609&id=bg9UAAAIAAJ&sjid=rowDAAAIAAJ&pg=5440,6335076&hl=en>.

<sup>36</sup> Goodstein, Laurie. "Falwell: Blame Abortionists, Feminists, and Gays." *New York Times*, September 19, 2001. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/19/september11.usa9>.

In Florida generally, the rate at which AIDS diagnoses increased was dramatic since the very first case was officially diagnosed in June of 1981 with new cases nearly doubled every year for the first six years.<sup>37</sup> Just two short years later, the sixth death resulting from AIDS-related complications occurred in Orlando. The Florida Department of Health subsequently declared AIDS a public health emergency and required doctors to report all known AIDS cases to the State Health Office.<sup>38</sup> By the years end, there were 236 confirmed cases.<sup>39</sup> The growing discontent with local, state, and federal governments' response to AIDS coupled with the rapid rate at which new AIDS cases were being diagnosed lead to local activists beginning to assert their own grassroots solutions and political agency.

As friends, lovers, coworkers and more were being lost to sickness, the community looked inward for solutions to the growing crisis by setting up fundraisers, support hotlines, benefits, and various assistance organizations to help fund research, care, and education. In other words, as stories of AIDS victims came to dominate the headlines, this issue propelled a community, which has historically been more comfortable within the confines of their own subcultural safe spaces to the forefront of political activism to challenge social norms in the name of dignity and equal rights. Further, while there were some voices within Central Florida's LGBTQ community that deemed the increasing politicization of gay rights activism as "too controversial" and that "they should leave well enough alone," others at the onset of the AIDS outbreak saw this as

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<sup>37</sup> "30 years of HIV/AIDS-A 2010 Update," Florida Department of Health, 2010, accessed on August 5, 2016, [http://www.floridahealth.gov/diseases-and-conditions/aids/surveillance/\\_documents/fact-sheet/HIV-30-Years-History1.pdf](http://www.floridahealth.gov/diseases-and-conditions/aids/surveillance/_documents/fact-sheet/HIV-30-Years-History1.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

a time “that they could finally break down the self-imposed ghetto many of our brothers and sisters have built around themselves.”<sup>40</sup> This liberation of sorts was not a spontaneous eruption but instead an application of the networks and connections made within the LGBTQ community over the preceding decades across other barriers such as race, socioeconomic status, and religion - a liberation by means of political action that was born out of necessity. The impetus for the sort of direct action employed due to the increasingly dire situation plaguing some of society’s most vulnerable populations was the spark that ignited monumental changes in the way that the battle for the civil rights and the dignity of sexual minorities in this country has been fought.

The Parliament House is an important establishment that not only became symbolic of LGBTQ progress in central Florida but also provided essential social services as AIDS began to devastate the community. Opened in 1975 by two business entrepreneurs, Bill Miller and Michael Hodge, the Parliament House was a bar and nightclub that hosted drag shows and other countercultural performances; however, it ultimately ended up serving as an important sanctuary for queer men and women during a time of an unprecedented health scare facing the community. The Parliament House owners Miller and Hodge started a multi-faceted community assistance program called AID Orlando, the first organization of its kind. According to a gay rights activist and Parliament House frequenter Michael Wanzie, “they just started raising money and paying people’s electric bills and paying people’s rent and getting people goods and services including just feeding people who literally couldn’t feed themselves and had nowhere else to turn.”<sup>41</sup> Wanzie de-

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<sup>40</sup> “Gay Pride and the Longest Day,” *New Direction*, June 1983, 4.

<sup>41</sup> *40 Years of the Parliament House*. Directed by David Bain. Performed by Michael Wanzie. July 27, 2015. accessed April 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pV7jKjWtZuA>.

scribed Miller and Hodge's willingness to dig into their own pockets to financially assist the local vulnerable populations most affected by AIDS. The nurturing spirit and desire to help those within the community who had not the means to help themselves would ultimately go on to characterize the like-minded organizations that arose in the shadow of AID Orlando.

The Parliament House's relationship to social justice extends far beyond AID Orlando. It hosted monthly Gay Community Services (GCS) meetings that aimed to tackle a variety of issues facing gay men and women including AIDS, personal issues such as depression, as well as broader systemic issues facing the gay community in Orlando. Further, these weekly meetings helped establish and articulate a coherent political identity for gay rights activism in the future. This grassroots response mounted by the community to help those most affected by AIDS in the community was a formative force for the cultural identity of the LGBTQ community and by extension the broader community as well. Many of the organizations that emerged at the height of the AIDS crisis ultimately remained in the community as part of a broader critical support system serving the LGBTQ people in a variety of different ways from counseling and support networks to medical services and information resources.

The sense of duty and initiative demonstrated by Miller and Hodge coupled with the fact that it was specifically a gay nightclub that was the organizing hub for their activism was both symbolic and emblematic of the state of gay rights activism during this time. Just as it took the patrons and employees of a gay bar in Greenwich Village to fight back against a long history of oppression at the Stonewall Inn in 1969, it took the founding of AID Orlando by owners and regulars of a gay bar to fight back in their own way against a system that neglected to address their needs when it was most crucial. As the Parliament House and Stonewall riots have demonstrated,

the centrality of gay bars and nightclubs in the restructuring of power relations between burgeoning gay rights activism and a status quo that doesn't respect the rights and dignity of LGBTQ people is crucial for understanding both AIDS activism as well as the broader trajectory of gay rights in the United States.

The oversized role of bars, taverns, and nightclubs in specifically gay political activism was borne out of necessity as there were not many conventional organizing structures available to gay men and women yet; however, while bars and night clubs would continue to be important in gay rights activism for decades, their centrality as meeting locations were seen as a problem by some activists. As the need for political action increased in the wake of the AIDS crisis, this topic was frequently the subject of the editorial pages of the many newspapers for gay men and women in Orlando. In one July 1983 edition of *New Direction*, one of a number newspapers written exclusively by and for Central Florida's budding LGBTQ community, the paper published an editorial claiming that bars alienate some members of the community that would otherwise be allies in the struggle for gay rights.<sup>42</sup> The article contends that "while bars and taverns have long played an important part in Gay life, many persons would rather see the political and social efforts toward "community" coming from a "non-bar direction."<sup>43</sup> This issue was one of several that came under increased scrutiny as the need for a unified coalition became increasingly vital.

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<sup>42</sup> "Gay Leaders Need Muscle Building," *New Direction*, July 1983, 4, accessed on August 19, 2016, [http://glbthistorymuseum.com/joomla25/images/PDF/1983.07%202.7%20NewDirection\\_1.pdf](http://glbthistorymuseum.com/joomla25/images/PDF/1983.07%202.7%20NewDirection_1.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Prior to this publication, *New Direction* cautioned against behavior that would increase the susceptibility its significant population of gay men to AIDS stating: “Since central Florida is the number one destination for the nation’s travelers, it will probably be a short time before one of the “Gay plagues” strikes a resident down.”<sup>44</sup> The types of actions taken by those within the community to bolster the local and state governments’ insufficient response to AIDS ranged in type, intention, and scope. Everything from charity fundraisers such as theatre productions and sporting events to information seminars were constant in the years that followed the onset of the AIDS crisis. Such events were met with varying degrees of success and constantly required local activists to recalibrate their approaches toward addressing the issue of AIDS in the gay community but also to help try to assuage pervasive fears for the broader community as well. For example, a benefit theatre production titled “Annie Against AIDS” in June of 1983 hosted by Gay Community Services (GCS) aimed to raise money for local AIDS research ultimately lost money requiring GCS to dig into their own bank accounts to recoup costs.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, as a result of these efforts, increased communication between AIDS researchers and the public were becoming more common both through media outlets as well as through public seminars and information sessions. These were important developments given the pervasive misinformation, hysteria, and fake AIDS treatments that were common in the early stages of the crisis.

Another important aspect of Orlando’s local response to the AIDS crisis was the role of organized religion in both helping to reduce the emotional and spiritual toll the epidemic had on

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<sup>44</sup> “Help with the Health Crisis,” *New Direction*, February, 1983, 4, accessed August 20, 2016, [http://glbthistorymuseum.com/joomla25/images/PDF/1983.02%202.2%20NewDirection\\_1.pdf](http://glbthistorymuseum.com/joomla25/images/PDF/1983.02%202.2%20NewDirection_1.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Weasley, Jay. "1983 Gay Pride Week Events Reveal Community Growth." *New Direction* (Orlando), July 1983.

the community but also the negative impact that other religious organizations had on the fight to combat AIDS. While the overall acceptance of members of the LGBTQ community by organized religion is checkered at best, Orlando represents a beacon of hope for many gay men and women of faith, particularly within the broader context of the hardline fundamentalist version of Christianity sweeping the American political landscape. Metropolitan Community Church, which began in the Los Angeles living room of Tallahassee native Rev. Troy Perry in 1968, is a church that functioned as a haven for gay people to worship without fear of judgment or violence.<sup>46</sup> Regarding the history of gay people attending church, Perry states, “we were thrown out, excommunicated but the hunger of wanting to be a member of the church, to be part of the family of God was still there.”<sup>47</sup>

While Joy Metropolitan Community Church was started in Rev. Perry’s Los Angeles’ based living room, the desire for gay men and women of faith to find a place of worship that was accepting of them was apparent and was evidenced by how rapidly different chapters of Joy MCC began sprouting up around the country. The Orlando chapter of MCC started as early as 1979 and immediately began to assume a leadership role in organizing LGBTQ members of the community, particularly those who had never felt comfortable relying on bars as central organizing hubs. One of the seminal actions taken by the church to help combat the epidemic and which helped solidify the critical role that religious organizations served on this front occurred in 1986. The 50-hour prayer vigil was held over the course of three days in late August and raised money

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<sup>46</sup> Wesley, Jay. “Gays Church Founder Claims MCC Message is Simple,” *New Direction*, 1983.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



for AIDS research by Central Florida AIDS Unified Resources as well as hold interdenominational worship services and information sessions aimed at dispelling common mistruths surrounding AIDS and HIV.

This event was important both for its effectiveness but perhaps even more importantly for its symbolic significance. The vigil was symbolic in central Florida's battle with AIDS for many reasons, the most prominent of which was that it provided a local organizing framework for the battle against AIDS that incorporated religious organizations, medical organizations and others all focused on raising awareness and money to help alleviate suffering. The 50-hour vigil occurred on the heels of a broad general shift in the public perception of AIDS generally from the frequently mythologized notion of the "gay plague" to a legitimate public health concern, which had implications on a national as well as a local level. One important implication resulting from this development in the public's understanding of AIDS coupled with the religious nature of the vigil was that it firmly solidified the role that churches, and religious organizations played in the healing process and spiritual support given to those affected by AIDS in any capacity. In an *Orlando Sentinel* article detailing the role of churches in comforting AIDS victims published right after the first Joy MCC Vigil in 1986, Rev. Eugene Labauch of Riverside Church articulated the essential problem facing churches and the role they should play in the AIDS struggle. "There's a great bitterness and a feeling of religious oppression, especially among people with AIDS and their loved ones... too many of these people die without any spiritual help."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> D'Antonio, Michael. "Sympathetic Churches Filling Needs of Gay AIDS Victims," *Orlando Sentinel*, September 14, 1986, accessed on November 16, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/orlandosentinel/docview/276904069/A0131DD95B7F46BFPQ/15?accountid=10003>.

Orlando's chapter of MCC was a direct attempt to alleviate the anxiety onset by this very issue within the LGBTQ community. Former MCC Pastor James T. Brock explains part of the Orlando church's aim is to "point out that salvation is by grace through faith. It has nothing to do with sexuality."<sup>49</sup> Even though Orlando was home to inclusive and progressive churches as early as 1979, the tradition of "religious oppression" toward gay people that Rev. Labauch discussed was a much longer tradition.<sup>50</sup>

While Joy MCC played a critical role in providing spiritual support during this time when there was a social stigma surrounding AIDS and homosexuality, other local support organizations played a crucial role as well. Given the lack of understanding of how the disease was contracted and spread in its early years, many nurses and doctors refused to even enter into a room if there was somebody with HIV or AIDS was inside. CENTAUR was one local organization that held information sessions to dispel some of the misinformation about AIDS as well as encourage members of the community to join their "buddy program" aimed at helping tear down some of the stigma plaguing the LGBTQ community. One volunteer cited his motivation for joining the group was his own experience with mistreatment and misperception when he had an immune system-compromising illness stating, "nobody would bring food in my room and my friends

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<sup>49</sup> Kunerth, Jeff. "Gay Lifestyles, Christian Faith Church Helps Clear A Religious Path For Homosexuals," *Orlando Sentinel*, February 16, 1986, accessed on November 17, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/docview/276765226/fulltext/3FE4A1DFD7744C71PQ/53?accountid=10003>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

wouldn't come to see me.”<sup>51</sup> It was experiences like this that underscored the empathy that motivated average people to get involved in the community's many grassroots response to the public health crisis.

In the years that followed the emergence of the AIDS epidemic, certain stigmas associated with homosexuality and sickness coalesced into a toxic fear that pervaded much of society not only in central Florida but across the country at large as well. While the broader discourse surrounding AIDS emboldened the self-serving narratives perpetuated by the Christian right under the guise of moralism, the impact resulted in both an increase in homophobic attitudes generally as well as an invigoration of a preexisting animus that had long been dormant. As political and legislative gains began to materialize in the form of increased funding for research and education campaigns, some prominent thinkers on the political right saw such developments not as attempts at stymying a growing epidemic, but as an active promotion of a “homosexual lifestyle.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Hubbard, Diane. “Victims, Buddies Stand Up to AIDS,” *Orlando Sentinel*, Nov. 13, 1986. accessed on January 2, 2017, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/orlandosentinel/docview/276956425/fulltext/499CA99CF67A4A73PQ/1?accountid=10003>.

<sup>52</sup> Murphy, Timothy. “No Time For An AIDS Backlash,” *Time*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Mar. – Apr., 1991), pp. 7-11. accessed on January 2, 2017: <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/stable/pdf/3562329.pdf>.

## CHAPTER 2: STATE AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

In the preceding chapter, I described how grassroots organizations in Orlando and central Florida dealt with the early days of the AIDS crisis because of a sweeping institutional failure to act. The general lack of an immediate and effective response by federal, state, and local government agencies was reflective of the relative marginal status of the LGBTQ community in a heteronormative society. With an analytical focus primarily on Orlando and central Florida, I argue that in the absence of any definitive action to combat the spreading or contraction rate of the AIDS/HIV epidemic in its early stages, local activists used whatever means available to them to assist others in the community struggling with the condition. In the pages that follow, I will describe the measures undertaken by various government agencies and institutions including federal surveillance programs from the CDC and sweeping AIDS legislation both of which were essential at the time. Further, I will argue that while local grassroots organizations played a crucial role in addressing the AIDS epidemic, it is apparent now that there is a crucially important role for government to play when addressing such a widespread national health crisis.

The ability of a society to combat the damage caused by an epidemic often relies on the convergence of several different and interdependent forces. One important factor is political will on behalf of the country's elected officials to take bold steps towards achieving effective solutions. In other words, it requires that those who occupy positions of power to be willing to expend their political capital to appropriate necessary funds for medical research, to advocate on behalf of the sick, and to mobilize the body politic behind their cause. The second component essential to grappling with an epidemic is cutting edge research. It is crucial during a large-scale health crisis that epidemiologists, specialists and medical researchers across disciplines share

their research in medical journals or other mediums in order to further new ideas about prevention and treatment. The third element necessary to effectively combatting an epidemic is the ability of activists among the citizenry to arouse demand for the government to play a larger role in its response to the crisis. Throughout history, grassroots activism has been a crucial weapon employed to pressure the government or supreme court toward a particular position. Evidence of the effectiveness of grassroots activist campaigns in the United States has been thoroughly documented from the Civil Rights Movement to Women’s Suffrage and more recently in the fight for Marriage Equality.<sup>53</sup>

The eventual scope of the AIDS crisis was not immediately known by those in elected office or within the national media. Ronald Reagan failed to mention AIDS by name publicly until 1985 – which by that point had claimed a total of 5,636 lives in the United States.<sup>54</sup> Whether it was out of a strategic political calculation or a general lack of concern, rather than choose to demonstrate leadership in a time of crisis, President Reagan compromised his moral authority in favor of political expediency. Perhaps the clearest demonstration of the way that the Reagan administration and many within the national media were dismissive of AIDS can be found in recently unearthed press conference footage documented in the short film *When AIDS Was Funny* by filmmaker Scott Calonico. In the film, Calonico shows footage of three different exchanges between press secretary Larry Speakes and members of the press exchanging homophobic jokes

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<sup>53</sup> Kauffman, L.A. *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2017.

<sup>54</sup> “A Timeline of HIV and AIDS.” [www.hiv.gov](http://www.hiv.gov). accessed September 29, 2017. <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline>.

and laughing about the so-called “gay plague.”<sup>55</sup> The exchange demonstrated that this disease was seen by those with the greatest ability to deal with the crisis as the butt of a joke more than a severe public health crisis.

The previous anecdote is illustrative of one end of the spectrum of the conception of AIDS by those who occupy positions of power demonstrating the blatant disregard for humanity that characterized the perception of AIDS by so many during this time. In this chapter, I will detail agencies, lawmakers, and legislation that were effective as well as ineffective in the battle against AIDS – those who helped the march of progress move forward and those who stood in its way. I will analyze the progress made in Orlando and central Florida within that of the broader framework of the country. In doing so I will highlight how certain social forces such as homophobia and fear of disease shaped the national discourse and hurt efforts to tackle the national epidemic.

To examine how both people and institutions addressed AIDS both nationally and locally, one has to look at a matrix of intersecting processes that must be coordinated in order to effectively tackle an epidemic. Essential to the federal government’s approach to curbing the mortality rate of AIDS and slowing its spread was the ability for several different interdisciplinary organizations to coordinate research and integrate information systems across different agencies and platforms; however, further hindering the ability of public health organizations to rise to this challenge was the lack of experience dealing with this new disease or lack of a coherent theory of the fundamental nature of AIDS. A brief analysis of a historical precedent helps

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<sup>55</sup> Clews, Colin. *Gay in the 80s: From Fighting For Our Rights to Fighting For Our Lives* (Leicester: Troubador Publishing, 2017), 232.

provide some insight into the strategic approach employed by the CDC to help slow the rate at which the outbreak was spreading.

Prior to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, sudden disease outbreaks have certainly occurred and challenged the ability of the federal government and biomedical establishment to formulate a coherent response. The outbreak of Legionnaire's Disease in 1976 is a helpful example of these challenges. The disease, which first emerged in the United States at an American Legion convention in Philadelphia in 1976, presented some of the same logistical issues that would later challenge and inform the response to the outbreak of AIDS only five years later.<sup>56</sup> Researchers were initially flummoxed by its cause and its spread knowing full well that treating this new outbreak would be impossible without discovering these two properties.

As epidemiologists began to investigate the new mysterious disease, they learned that water and air were critical to contracting and spreading the disease.<sup>57</sup> Public health officials discovered that it was a strain of bacterium in the water that led to Legionnaire's Disease and that the disease was being transferred through the air. As a result, steps could be taken to halt the epidemic and identify treatment options for the infected. Understanding both the successes as well as the failures associated with the outbreak of Legionnaire's Disease in 1976 is important because of its similarities to the AIDS epidemic.

As was the case regarding the aforementioned Legionnaire's disease epidemic, epidemiologists were able to discover fairly quickly what the causative agents of the disease were. Upon the discovery that it was HIV that was the predecessor to AIDS in 1983, the expectation among

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<sup>56</sup> Duesberg, Peter H. *Inventing the AIDS Virus*. Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 1996), 54.

<sup>57</sup> Weeks, Benjamin S. and Terri Shors, *AIDS The Biological Basis* (Burlington: Jones and Bartlett, 2014), 112.

many within the scientific community was that the outbreak would be interrupted relatively rapidly and effectively.<sup>58</sup> While the AIDS epidemic would continue to perplex scientists for decades to come, certain initial discoveries such as the discovery of HIV as the causative agent and the at-risk demographic groups made it possible for the CDC and other health organizations to implement measures to begin slowing the rate of infection.

One of the first crucial steps taken to better understand the epidemiological contours of AIDS was the implementation of a national surveillance program designed by the CDC in 1981.<sup>59</sup> By this time, Florida experienced a total of seven confirmed AIDS cases of the 152 cases nationwide.<sup>60</sup> As the rate of contraction continued to climb nationally, so too did the number of cases in Florida. The troubling trend of rapid increased AIDS and HIV rates lead to an increased number of federal resources directed to research, entitlement programs, and surveillance of the new disease. One of the initial steps undertaken on a federal level by CDC to address this new disease was a surveillance program aimed at discovering commonalities shared among the emerging diagnoses.

The complex system of data aggregation was initiated almost immediately after it became apparent that the first handful of concurrent cases of Kaposi's Sarcoma and Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia were found to be related. The CDC's approach to collecting information on new AIDS cases required that state and local health departments implement a system that examined

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<sup>58</sup> Shoub, B.D. *AIDS & HIV in Perspective: A Guide to Understanding the Virus and its Consequences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>59</sup> Brookmeyer, Ron and Mitchell H. Gail. *AIDS Epidemiology: A Quantitative Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 170.

<sup>60</sup> For more information on AIDS/HIV trends in Florida, see the following chart [http://www.floridahealth.gov/diseases-and-conditions/aids/surveillance/\\_documents/HIV-AIDS-slide%20sets/Year\\_by\\_Year\\_1981-2012.pdf](http://www.floridahealth.gov/diseases-and-conditions/aids/surveillance/_documents/HIV-AIDS-slide%20sets/Year_by_Year_1981-2012.pdf).



the demographic components of AIDS victims' identities as well as collect information about symptoms experienced and other potential treatment options.<sup>61</sup> In order to coordinate such a massive federal operation, the CDC requested all fifty states to opt in to the program. By 1986, five years the CDC began this data collection operation, all fifty states signed on to participate in the program. Ultimately epidemiologists analyzed the information collected about all reported AIDS cases occurring across the United States.<sup>62</sup>

The sharing of personal information between different government and private research organizations has always been the subject of controversy. Questions surrounding the prudence of sharing such information with a sprawling government bureaucracy and its potential implications for the future inevitably arose following the implementation of a national surveillance program; however, the argument surrounding the tension between one's freedoms and the sacrifice of those freedoms in the name of safety and protection of the citizenry is intrinsic to all liberal democratic forms of government. This program was not immune to the trappings associated with this debate given the scope of the effort undertaken by the CDC to collect sensitive personal information of a broad cross-section of the populace. Due to the multi-layered approach of this data collection program that relies on the case reporting of hundreds of local and state entities, how these different entities have addressed concerns about privacy and identity protection have varied. Balancing concerns surrounding the protection of the identities of the sick with the right of

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<sup>61</sup> Nakshima, Allyn K. and Patricia L. Fleming, "HIV/AIDS Surveillance in the United States, 1981-2001," *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes*, Volume 32, (February 2003): [http://journals.lww.com/jaids/Fulltext/2003/02011/HIV\\_AIDS\\_Surveillance\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States,.11.aspx](http://journals.lww.com/jaids/Fulltext/2003/02011/HIV_AIDS_Surveillance_in_the_United_States,.11.aspx)

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

the general public to know potential medical risks were hotly contested. Approaching the delicate subject matter inherent in a debate such as this was important to get right for its profound consequences on public opinion and the stigma surrounding AIDS. One of the results of this debate was the interdisciplinary approach to addressing public health threats utilizing epidemiology and behavioral sciences as well as integrated surveillance techniques. This approach which was honed in the fight against AIDS helped to shape strategies later employed to manage public health threats in the future including infectious disease and terrorism.<sup>63</sup>

Despite some of the controversies surrounding this surveillance program, certain characteristics of AIDS discovered became important signifiers for the at-risk behaviors as well as the demographic composition of those most at risk. The first stage of data collection and analysis of people with AIDS made clear what scientists had already suspected regarding who was most at risk for contracting the disease: gay and bisexual men and intravenous drug users were significantly more at risk than other populations.<sup>64</sup> Of the first 1,000 AIDS cases collected from 32 states and the District of Columbia through the CDC's national surveillance program, it was reported that 727 of those cases could be attributed to gay or bisexual men.<sup>65</sup> While the contraction rate of AIDS was projected to continue to increase exponentially, discovering the most vulnerable allowed for the strategic targeting of those populations to modify behavior patterns.

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<sup>63</sup> Buehler, James. "HIV and AIDS Surveillance: Public Health Lessons Learned" in *Dawning Answers: How the HIV/AIDS Fight Has Helped to Strengthen Public Health*, edited by Ronald O. Valdiserri, M.D., M.P.H., 50. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>64</sup> Marx, Jean L. "New Disease Baffles Medical Community" in *Science*, Vol. 217, No. 4560 (1982), 618-621. accessed on Dec. 12, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1688901>.

<sup>65</sup> Jaffe, Harold W., Dennis J. Bregman and Richard M. Selik. "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome in the United States: The First 1,000 Cases" in *The Journal of Infectious Diseases*, Vol. 148, No. 2. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 339-345.

In Orlando, the first person to contract AIDS and receive experimental treatment at the behest of the federal government as a part of its overall strategy to monitor, research and treat new AIDS cases occurred in 1983.<sup>66</sup> One of the reasons for the exponential increase in AIDS cases in its initial stages was due to the fact that there were often no evident signs of symptoms sometimes for up to two years. This led to risky sexual habits that put at risk countless others who then perpetuated this pattern resulting in the exponential increase of contraction rates. By April of 1983, there had been three confirmed AIDS cases in Orange County with estimates of up to 10,000 possible undiagnosed and unreported cases nationwide.<sup>67</sup> The first steps undertaken in Orange County in any official capacity were initiated at the urging of Jim Welch who at this time was the president of Gay Community Services of Central Florida (GCS). Speaking to Orlando City Council and the Orange County Board of Commissioners, Welch advocated for increased funding allocation for AIDS research from the federal government as well as increased coordination between central Florida's medical society and host of other federal organizations that deal with public health risks.<sup>68</sup> Backed by Orange County's public health supervisor and much of the medical community, this legislation, which passed the city council unanimously and the board of commissioners by a narrow 3-2 vote, represented the first steps undertaken by the Orange County government toward curbing the spread of AIDS.

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<sup>66</sup> Wesley, Jay. "Orlando Man Studied in AIDS Research," *New Direction*, March 1983.

<sup>67</sup> Wesley, Jay. "City, County Officials Join AIDS Research Campaign," *New Direction*, April 1983, 1.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

While the bill advocated by Jim Welch and passed in April of 1983 represented progress from a legislative standpoint, the symbolic significance it represented was immense. Addressing this issue upon the passing of this bill, Welch made the following remarks:

The significance of this political action is something that will be measured in the years ahead. It is the first time that our local government leaders have been asked to deal with legislation that has a direct and meaningful impact on the gay community. It proves gay citizens, working through the system, can achieve positive results. This will not be the last time that we will go to city hall and the county courthouse to seek cooperation from elected officials.<sup>69</sup>

Around the country during this time and continuing for the years to come, other cities with significant populations of gay rights activists began passing similar legislation to this bill passed in Orange County. It was these initial investments made early on that allowed for advancements and research. The first bill of its kind was passed earlier in the same year in San Francisco.<sup>70</sup>

A similar trend toward increased attention and funding allocated for AIDS treatment and research began to sweep across many states' legislatures during this time as well. By 1986, the Florida state legislature appropriated nearly \$5 million in funding to help establish support networks that include social services and various medical treatment options for low-income communities.<sup>71</sup> The funds were split up among the six counties in Florida that were hit the hardest by AIDS with Orange County being the county with the fourth highest in the state. Given that the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> McKusick, Leon, ed., *What to Do about AIDS: Physicians and Mental Health Professionals Discuss the Issues*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 193.

<sup>71</sup> Selditch, Dianne. "Orange Gets \$75,000 to Help Poor with AIDS" in *Orlando Sentinel*, November 7, 1986, B1.

AIDS crisis was already disproportionately effecting marginalized groups including gay men, intravenous drug users, and people of color, the funding package was aimed at helping to offset the psychological burden placed on groups that were already subject to discrimination through support groups, counseling, and hotlines.

While the physical symptoms and maladies imposed by the affliction of sickness are devastating and can take a tremendous toll on one's body, there are significant unseen consequences as well and those affect not only the sick but their caretakers as well. As networks of social support began to emerge initiated by local grassroots activists as well through funding from federal, state and local sources, it is important to briefly examine the psychological and emotional burden of so many who have struggled with the epidemic in some capacity that led to the emergence of these support networks. Anybody whose life or work is remotely within the sphere of AIDS or HIV, whether it's a spouse, a counselor, a nurse or doctor, is keenly aware that death and loss is an intrinsic component of dealing with these illnesses. For patients, upon the immediate diagnosis, one is forced to reckon the fact that all previous conceptions of life in the future must be viewed through the prism of illness and mortality. For nurses or caretakers, one is forced to accept the fact that death, loss, and grief are to inevitably become a constant presence in everyday life. For friends and spouses of those affected by this sickness, loss becomes a specter that is lurking in the background of every poignant conversation or meaningful interaction - the subtext to one's everyday happenings. It is this immense burden forced upon those who deal with AIDS that was the impetus behind the push toward dealing with the psychological and emotional ramifications of AIDS.

Speaking with the Orlando Sentinel in 1985, Reverend James Brock of the LGBTQ friendly Joy Metropolitan Community Church in Orlando stated, “In the past year I have done more memorial services in connection with AIDS than I have done in the last six years for all reasons.”<sup>72</sup> One of the reoccurring themes that people who interact with AIDS in any capacity tend to share is the overwhelming sense of grief that accompanies the tragic reality of disease. While grief is a complex state of being that includes physical, emotional, and psychological implications, within this context, grief can be defined as “a social process and is best dealt with in a social setting in which people can support and reinforce each other in their emotions to the loss.”<sup>73</sup> In central Florida as well as other urban centers around the country, to alleviate the suffering incurred as a result of the stigma associated with AIDS and lack of conventional support structures, support groups become a crucial component to healing. In an article detailing the unique utility of support groups specific to those dealing with AIDS trauma, James Monahan asserts, “because AIDS is a topic that people often avoid or repress, support groups offer an opportunity for people to speak openly about this stigmatized illness.”<sup>74</sup>

Increased attention to the emotional and psychological traumas experienced by AIDS victims became an important part of a more holistic approach taken by medical doctors in their treatment of AIDS. One long-term AIDS survivor and activist from Orlando has said, “I’ve seen

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<sup>72</sup> Burns, Diane Hubbard. “It’s Not Over When It’s Over: Partners of AIDS Victims Carry a Heavy Burden” in *Orlando Sentinel*, April 5, 1987.

<sup>73</sup> Stylianos, S.K., & Vachon, M.L.S. “The Role of Social Support in Bereavement” in *Handbook of Bereavement: Theory, Research, and Intervention*, eds. M.S. Stroebe, W. Stroebe and R.O. Hansson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 397.

<sup>74</sup> Monahan, James. R. “Developing and Facilitating AIDS Bereavement Support Groups” in *Group*, Vol. 18, No. 3, *The Challenge of AIDS*, 1994, p. 177-185.

so many people and heard so many stories about families who've just dropped them, who actually say, 'you don't exist in our family anymore.'"<sup>75</sup> The loss of a supportive social network when struggling with a diagnosis or grieving the loss of a loved one to a stigmatized illness such as AIDS has been known to exacerbate the difficulty of coping for so many. When considering the treatment process for AIDS in holistic terms, the emotional trauma, mental anguish, and feelings of guilt or shame impair the ability of the person struggling with a diagnosis to resist succumbing to depression. On this matter, Orlando infectious disease specialist Dr. William Robbins asserts, "I've found over the years that those people who have a poor outlook or poor self-image and don't really push that much tend to succumb a lot quicker than those who have a good outlook."<sup>76</sup> As a result, much of the treatment prescriptions for AIDS and HIV made a point to integrate treatment for the emotional and psychological implications of disease as well as the physical maladies incurred.

As the number of deaths continued to climb nationally, Florida claimed a significant percentage of the overall mortalities. By 1993, central Florida reached a rather somber milestone in its struggle with AIDS. There were 2,291 AIDS-related deaths by the winter of this year in central Florida which was enough for the area to be declared a disaster zone entitling Orlando to three million dollars in federal funding allocated specifically for AIDS treatment, research, and counseling.<sup>77</sup> By this time, AIDS had become the leading cause of death among persons between

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<sup>75</sup> Barbieri, Susan M. "Living With AIDS Long-term Survivors Must Put Grief Aside And Learn To Get By Day to Day" in *Orlando Sentinel*, November 7, 1991, E1.

<sup>76</sup> Barbieri, Susan M. "Living With AIDS Long-term Survivors Must Put Grief Aside And Learn To Get By Day to Day" in *Orlando Sentinel*, November 7, 1991, E1.

<sup>77</sup> Kunerth, Jeff. "The Increase In Cases Brings More US Funding As Friends Remember Victims of the Disease" in *Orlando Sentinel*, December 1, 1993, D1.

twenty-five and forty-four years of age accounting for approximately two percent of all deaths in the United States.<sup>78</sup>

Throughout the course of the AIDS epidemic, there were certain legislative accomplishments made on both a state and federal level that made demonstrable progress toward helping curb the death rate. In addition, certain events helped alleviate some of the stigma that had been so closely affiliated with AIDS. One turning point in the early days of AIDS that changed the public perception of the disease and which also had significant public policy implications occurred in 1984. Whereas previously AIDS was deemed “the gay disease” and associated with drug users or immoral promiscuity, this fundamentally inaccurate understanding of the nature of AIDS began to shift in 1984 with Ryan White and the Ryan White Act. This event allowed for the social construction of AIDS that had dominated the national discourse to this point to make way for a more human and three-dimensional conception of the disease.

The story of Ryan White, as is the case with so many other incidents of AIDS, is one of tragedy; however, it represents a crucial turning point in the overall story of AIDS in the United States. Ryan White, who was from a small midwestern town in Indiana, was fourteen years old in 1984.<sup>79</sup> Suffering from severe hemophilia, White was diagnosed with AIDS following a lung biopsy procedure in which he was exposed to a blood treatment program contaminated with

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<sup>78</sup> “Mortality Attributable to HIV Infection/AIDS - United States, 1981-1990” in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Jan. 25, 1991), 41-44. accessed on Dec. 1, 2017 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24248187>.

<sup>79</sup> Price, Nelson. *The Quiet Hero: A Life of Ryan White* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2015), 1.



HIV.<sup>80</sup> At the time of White's diagnosis was disclosed to the public, there still was not conclusive evidence of how the virus was contracted or spread; in fact, there was an inordinate amount of misinformation in circulation at this time further confounding the issue. As a result, there was panic on behalf of local parents who felt that White's attendance at school posed a severe risk to their own children.<sup>81</sup> Despite being cleared to attend school and deemed not a risk to the health of the other students by the Health Commissioner of Indiana, public hysteria enveloped this issue and the story garnered national attention.

As Ryan White's situation became the focus of the national media and the center of a national dialogue, White himself became an unlikely activist. Frequently appearing on popular television shows and even testifying before the President's commission on AIDS, White's public profile continuously grew to gain the support of famous actors, musicians, and celebrities.<sup>82</sup> White's experience with AIDS became a crucial episode in the history of this epidemic that allowed many in the country to have their first insight into the tragic nature of AIDS.

Ryan White changed the face of AIDS in the eyes of the general public. Given the previous public perception that AIDS was relegated solely to society's least desirable populations i.e. drug users, homosexual men and people of color, the fact that an all-American boy from the Midwest contracted the disease led a long-overdue national discussion. This incident not only changed the volume of the media's coverage of AIDS, but it perhaps more importantly changed

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<sup>80</sup> Howard, Markel, Ph D. "Remembering Ryan White, the teen who fought against the stigma of AIDS" *PBS News Hour* (April 8, 2016) accessed on November 26, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/remembering-ryan-white-the-teen-who-fought-against-the-stigma-of-aids>.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Bell, Sigall K., M.D., Courtney L. McMickens, M.D.,M.P.H., and Kevin J. Selby, M.D. *AIDS*. (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 96.

the tenor of its coverage as well. Initially, media coverage framed AIDS with the misnomer of “gay pneumonia.”<sup>83</sup> At the time, the spokesperson for National Commission on AIDS asserted, “After seeing a person like Ryan White – such a fine and loving and gentle person – it was hard for people to justify discrimination against people who suffer from this terrible disease.”<sup>84</sup> Ryan White’s struggle with AIDS showed the country that AIDS wasn’t merely a threat to gay men but a dangerous epidemic that posed a threat to people of all walks of life.

As the general public’s perception of AIDS became deeper, there were significant policy implications that resulted from the Ryan White story that is worth briefly describing. Following White’s death in 1990, the United States Congress signed into law The Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency CARE Act in the fall.<sup>85</sup> First, the federal government allocated \$86 million to advance biomedical research and also alleviate the financial burden hospitals were under as a result of the AIDS epidemic. This consequential legislative development solidified White’s legacy as an important chapter in the history of AIDS advocacy in this country.<sup>86</sup> Fur-

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<sup>83</sup> Brodie, Mollyann, Oh.D., Elizabeth Hamel, Lee Ann Brady, Jennifer Kates, M.A., M.P.A., and Drew E. Altman, Ph.D. "AIDS at 21: Media Coverage of the HIV Epidemic." *The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation*: 1-8. accessed August 8, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090326213042/http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/upload/AIDS-at-21-Media-Coverage-of-the-HIV-Epidemic-1981-2002-Supplement-to-the-March-April-2004-issue-of-CJR.pdf>.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson, Dirk, “Ryan White Dies of AIDS at 18; His Struggle Helped Pierce Myths,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), April 9, 1990.

<sup>85</sup> Slack, James. “Zero-Sum Politics, The Herbert Thesis, And The Ryan White Care Act: Lessons Learned from the Local Side of AIDS” in *Journal of Health and Human Services Administration*, Vol. 24, NO. 1, 2001. accessed: Nov. 27, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/stable/pdf/41426786.pdf>

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, Dirk, “Ryan White Dies of AIDS at 18; His Struggle Helped Pierce Myths,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), April 9, 1990.

ther solidifying the symbolic significance the CARE Act is the fact that the bill has been continuously signed back into law every year to date by successive presidential administrations transcending the trappings of partisan politics.

At the time that the CARE Act was passed in Congress, Florida's struggle with the AIDS epidemic grew with the total number of AIDS diagnoses doubling from the year before.<sup>87</sup> One common criticism of the response to the AIDS epidemic that emerged early on both in Florida and nationally is the idea that the money allocated in the initial stages of the outbreak was consistently insufficient. In Florida, the state legislature did, however, take some important steps early on. These basic steps were aimed at protecting the dignity of AIDS patients such as anti-discrimination laws in the realm of housing and employment passed through the legislature.<sup>88</sup> Despite some significant progress being made to improve education about the transmission of AIDS and HIV in the state, many involved continued to argue that progress was not developing at a fast enough rate.

One of the successful strategies employed by the CDC to fight AIDS revolved around officially awarded funds that were given to states with high populations of AIDS and HIV cases if they met certain requirements. States opted in to receive federal funds as long as they met provisions dictating AIDS-related education, counseling, and safety precautions. This allowed for states to develop strategies that specifically catered to the particularities of their situation and to then share methodologies with other states should they be successful.

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<sup>87</sup> Gallagher, Kirsten. "Florida Grappling with AIDS Twice the Cases Since '88 – Going to Get Worse" in *Orlando Sentinel* (January 23, 1989), A1.

<sup>88</sup> The Florida Omnibus AIDS Act was passed in 1988. The first bill of its kind, it sought sweeping reforms, financial aid campaigns, and financial relief.

Florida became the first state to enact a sweeping piece of legislation codifying certain public safety initiatives and AIDS education requirements for healthcare providers. While Florida set the precedent, many states were soon to follow in their footsteps passing similar AIDS-related bills into law. In 1988, the Florida legislature acted signing into law the Omnibus AIDS Act.<sup>89</sup> While the bill was expansive and covered a multitude of issues related to the epidemic, the most comprehensive portion of the legislation addresses the issue of discrimination against those with AIDS and violation of the civil rights of AIDS victims.

Protections for AIDS victims from discrimination was extended to housing, employment, insurance and other areas with the Omnibus Act because, according to the Florida State Law Review at the time, “AIDS induced discrimination threatens to force thousands of people onto the public dole as employment, health services, insurance, and housing are denied them.”<sup>90</sup> The logic articulated here draws an inextricable line between the moral argument for sweeping AIDS legislation with the financial argument that investing more in the AIDS issue as a whole upfront will ultimately end up being more fiscally sound in the end. Given that the cost of healthcare coverage for AIDS victims was so catastrophic, finding a private insurer to accommodate the cost of AIDS-related expenses was a major problem not only in Florida but in other areas with significant populations of AIDS victims. This issue of skyrocketing medical costs putting a financial strain on individuals and the healthcare system as a whole is what Florida’s Omnibus Act

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<sup>89</sup> Hartog, Jack P. “Florida's Omnibus AIDS Act: A Brief Legal Guide For Health Care Professionals.” [www.floridahealth.gov](http://www.floridahealth.gov). Florida Department of Health Division of Disease Control and Health Protection, August 2013. [http://www.floridahealth.gov/diseases-and-conditions/aids/administration/\\_documents/Omnibus-booklet-update-2013.pdf](http://www.floridahealth.gov/diseases-and-conditions/aids/administration/_documents/Omnibus-booklet-update-2013.pdf).

<sup>90</sup> Waters, Craig. “Florida’s Omnibus AIDS Act of 1988” in *Florida State University Law Review* (Vol. 16. Issue 3, 1988), 446.

set out to improve. Similarly, as the rate of AIDS diagnoses began to wane in correlation with the influx of money into the system, other states began to pass similar pieces of legislation and invest more resources to reduce the rate of AIDS cases in their respective states.

The era of the AIDS epidemic described above demonstrates that in order to effectively address such a massive public health crisis, institutional investment is essential. Everything from the CDC's AIDS surveillance program to Florida's sweeping Omnibus Bill illustrates how important the role of government is when addressing large scale national issues. In addition, stories such as that of Ryan White evidence the tremendous potential of the individual to change people's lives and ultimately the course of American history through the simple yet noble act of storytelling and advocacy.

### **CHAPTER 3: THE LEGACY OF AN EPIDEMIC – A COMMUNITY IN MOURNING**

The onset of the AIDS epidemic in the United States forced a countless number of Americans to reckon with mortality in profound ways. Within the context of such a devastating disease, death is often untimely and unexpected. Given that this epidemic disproportionately impacted a subsection of the general population that had historically been marginalized and persecuted, the trauma experienced as a result of the AIDS epidemic was exacerbated by a lack of institutional support, medical expertise, political attentiveness, and widespread social support for its victims and their loved ones. As a result of this indifference and exclusion, the gay community and its allies created rituals to mourn the dead and comfort the living. The process of mourning in the wake of the AIDS epidemic became an integral part of the cultural identity of the Orlando LGBTQ community and laid a foundation upon which the community united in the wake of other unexpected tragedies.

In this chapter, I argue that Orlando's complicated experience with AIDS and HIV shaped the LGBTQ community's cultural identity. Further, I describe the inextricable connection between the deep sense of grief felt within the community and the continuous pursuit of social justice on behalf of AIDS victims. Mourning the dead and militancy for the living defined the cultural identity of the LGBTQ community moving forward. In this chapter, I analyze how some of the grassroots organizations created to help combat the epidemic were the very same organizations that were that allowed the LGBTQ community to cope later when confronting tragedy. Many of the organizations founded during this era strengthened their infrastructure and expanded their scope by providing free and inexpensive STD screenings, hosting community events and

fundraisers among other services. Further, I describe how some of the very same grassroots organizing principles employed out of necessity during the AIDS epidemic later were used for other purposes. While the massive scale and death toll of the AIDS epidemic represents a dark chapter in the history of Orlando and the nation, the response to this crisis transformed the LGBTQ community in many positive ways as well. Within this context, I explore a range of effects resulting from the devastation of AIDS including some of the unlikely constructive changes that occurred in the wake of the tragedy. Further, I contend that the complex legacy of the AIDS epidemic is not solely comprised of its darkest and most painful elements, but it is also important to consider the growth and the healing within communities that played an integral role on both a local and national scale.

In discussing a certain era or movement's legacy, implicit in the analysis of the definitive beginning and definitive end to the period in question - a clean start and finish to characterize the historical epoch. Specifically, because of the finite nature of the period of focus, an analysis of its legacy can be conducted; however, for this thesis, it is important to detail what an analysis of the legacy of AIDS entails given that new diagnoses of AIDS and HIV cases continue to accrue every year. As recently as 2015, Florida claimed the dubious distinction of having the second-highest rate of new HIV diagnoses among all other states nearly doubling the national average.<sup>91</sup> Further, of all urban or metropolitan areas across the country, Orlando claims the sixth-highest rate of new HIV cases.<sup>92</sup>

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Cordeiro, Monivette. "Florida Cities Lead the Nation in New HIV Diagnoses and Very Little Has Been Done About It." *The Orlando Sentinel*, accessed on April 7, 2018, . <https://www.orlandoweekly.com/orlando/florida-cities-lead-the-nation-in-new-hiv-diagnoses-and-not-much-has-been-done-about-it/Content?oid=5529838&showFullText=true>.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

The threat of AIDS and HIV to at-risk populations is not a relic of the past and in fact, in certain states including Florida, the rate of new diagnoses has been on the rise in recent years.<sup>93</sup> As a result, it is important to outline the temporal scope of analysis here. Since the very first officially documented occurrences of AIDS occurred in this country in 1981, new diagnoses increased at a rapid rate as the science and medical communities scrambled to learn more about the new mysterious disease. The number of new AIDS cases since the epidemic began dramatically increased every year until reaching a plateau in 1993.<sup>94</sup> According to the CDC, the number of new AIDS cases began to decrease at this time due to a number of factors including a significant increase in public education campaigns, improvement in treatment options, increased state and federal funding over the years as well as a changing societal understanding of the social stigma associated with disease over the years. Given that the rate of new AIDS cases peaked by 1993 before they began to slow down and eventually steady, this era seems an apt place to draw the temporal limit for this analysis of the legacy of AIDS as it marked a turning point.

Throughout the city's struggle with mourning, grief, and loss as a result of AIDS, much of the pain experienced by those in the LGBTQ community was exacerbated by social stigma and widespread hostility. The pervasive sense of loss and perpetual mourning during the epidemic was so widespread that it became fundamentally enmeshed in the DNA of the cultural identity of the LGBTQ community. Mourning is a process that has layers of meaning and occurs both as an individual process as well as a collective phenomenon. Within the context of AIDS

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<sup>93</sup>Bousquet, Steve, and Michael Auslen. "Florida Leads U.S. in New HIV Cases after Years of Cuts in Public Health." *Miami Herald/Tallahassee Bureau*, January 23, 2016. accessed March 29, 2019, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/state/florida/article56192770.html>.

<sup>94</sup>"HIV and AIDS - United States, 1981-2000." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly*, June 8, 2001. accessed April 1, 2018. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm>.



and AIDS activism, a subject so heavily steeped with political implications, it is important to discuss what David M. McIvor refers to as the *politics of mourning*. McIvor asserts “the politics of mourning is to acknowledge the ways that these responses often feed into and are fed by broader social struggles for redress, recognition, or reparation.”<sup>95</sup> As the number of people who were collectively grieving the loss of loved ones continued to multiply, the relationship between mourning and activism became increasingly evident. Further, as social activism surrounding AIDS increased in its urgency and the disease became increasingly understood by much of the public as both a civil rights and social justice issue. Concurrently, the number of organizations that focused on issues of discrimination, legal protection, and treatment for those faced with the disease began to multiply as well.

In many ways, Orlando based LGBTQ support organizations were at the forefront of the grassroots-led infrastructure working to raise awareness, increase activism and strive for social justice surrounding this issue. In 1991, Orlando’s Hope and Help Center of Central Florida organized a nationwide protest in coordination with the World Health Organization’s AIDS Awareness Day called A Day Without Art.<sup>96</sup> This protest, one of several I will describe as emblematic of what was happening on a broader scale to push back against government ineptitude, was seen as a resounding success. It is a prime example of how strategically calculated acts of protest always coexisted with the ever-present pangs of heartache and the visceral rawness of loss. The

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<sup>95</sup>McIvor, David W. *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>96</sup> Twardy, Chuck. "Art Museum Picketed after AIDS Event." *The Orlando Sentinel*, December 2, 1989, accessed January 3, 2019, D1. <https://search.proquest.com/southeast-news/docview/277558990/FA341A9A86024E48PQ/1?accountid=10003>.

protest consisted of forty activists engulfing the front steps of the Orlando Museum of Art to protest the museum's decision not to participate in A Day Without Art. Protesters showed up armed with homemade signs, chanted slogans, and carried empty frames to symbolize the loss of all of the artists who have succumbed to AIDS over the years. As these protests were occurring; however, across town there was another event occurring. Just miles away at Lake Lily, CENTAUR, another AIDS and LGBTQ support organization, planned a candlelight vigil to mourn the tragic loss of so many in the community and around the country. Visitors wore black as they mourned the fallen in this moment of collective public grief.

As part of A Day Without Art, the two planned actions described above demonstrate the intrinsic connection between AIDS political activism and the process mourning. One was never present without the other. The loss as it was expressed at the vigil illuminates the enormous chasm felt following such a widespread tragedy particularly within an already marginalized community. Similarly, the call to action demonstrated by the protest at the Orlando Museum of Art, which was designed to be purposefully disruptive and demand attention, evidenced the outrage felt by so many that accompanied the AIDS epidemic. The extricable connection between the immense grief felt and the call for social justice, or David M. McIvor's understanding of the *politics of mourning*, represents a consistent theme throughout Orlando as well as the country's struggle with AIDS and HIV. This day of action orchestrated by the Hope and Help Center of Central Florida successfully organized a public protest event and saw participation across the country with over 500 museums and galleries taking part.<sup>97</sup> Further, it helped to cement the combination of AIDS activism and mourning as integral components of the cultural identity of the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, D1.

LGBTQ community and offered lessons that were instructive moving forward for dealing with future tragedies.

If the most fundamental obligation of a democratic form of government is to protect its citizenry, the initial response of the federal government in the face of the staggering number of life-threatening diagnoses represents a devastating dereliction of duty. As I have described previously, the consequences regarding the massive mortality rate were severe and were accompanied by immense emotional trauma and psychological turmoil. Another consequence, however, was the reaction of the community. In the face of such adverse circumstances, many of the still newly constituted grassroots organizations began to mobilize community members who protested, boycotted and took to the streets in order to demand protection, inclusion, and ultimately to be considered a legitimate constituency within the broader body politic. While AIDS was unquestionably a source of shame for many, according to Neil Small, “AIDS, for some, adds further urgency and intensity to the need for affirmation.”<sup>98</sup> In other words, the consequences of not acting had exponentially dire implications for the future and for many activists like Small, this sense of urgency was palpable.

The scale of grief and outrage over the insufficient response to the epidemic was immense and as a result, had political implications for those in positions of power. According to

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<sup>98</sup> Small, Neil. “Suffering in Silence? Public Visibility, Private Secrets and the Social Construction of AIDS,” in *AIDS: Activism and Alliances* (Bristol: Taylor & Francis Publishers, 1997), 14.

Gail Holst-Warhaft,” if there is a reason not to contain it - if rage serves some purpose, it becomes *political outrage*.<sup>99</sup> As described above, one of the ways Orlando’s LGBTQ organizations articulated some of its political outrage was through public demonstrations aimed at drawing attention to the issue. While raising awareness of this issue was certainly crucial, the institutional assault on the rights and dignity of the LGBTQ community and particularly those who have been diagnosed with AIDS continued. The temporal scope of this analysis ends in by 1993 since that was the first time since the onset of the AIDS epidemic that the rate of deaths began to decrease; however, that is not to imply that this timeframe was not without its share of constant setbacks. Historical progress, as has been demonstrated time and time again, is never a strictly linear endeavor.

Throughout this era, the LGBTQ community established community support groups resiliently protested for social justice and saw the passage of some legislative successes including the sweeping Ryan White HIV/AIDS Prevention Act; however, as is often the case with civil rights movements and social progress throughout history, the progress made was continuously met with countervailing and counterproductive legislative initiatives.<sup>100</sup> Given the rise of the religious right beginning in the 1980s along with the burgeoning gay rights movement during this time, it’s not surprising that these two concurrent and antithetical social movements experienced success as well as defeats both on legislative fronts as well as within the culture wars. With the prevailing and hypocritical trend of moralism of the 1990s consuming much of the two major

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<sup>99</sup> Holst-Warhaft. *The Cue for Passion: Grief and Its Political Uses* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>100</sup> Price, Nelson. *The Quiet Hero: A Life of Ryan White* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2015), 125.

American political parties in this country, the Clinton administration passed multiple discriminatory laws including Don't Ask, Don't Tell in 1993 and the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996; however, coinciding with these legislative setbacks were many successes on behalf of the Gay Rights Movement. Despite much of the anti-gay fervor that dominated much of the political atmosphere in the 1990s, countless state supreme courts across the country throughout this period began decriminalizing sodomy laws, banning discrimination based on sexual orientation in public schools as well as within the public and private sector. The concurrence of these two countervailing trends within the American political arena during this time symbolizes the crux of the gay rights movement since its inception within a climate of a highly homophobic political class.

In Elizabeth A. Armstrong's analysis of sexuality and social movements in San Francisco from 1950-1994, Armstrong contends, "that the key to understanding the paradox of gay identity lies in its historical origins."<sup>101</sup> While this advice can apply to an analysis of any group or subgroup, it has particular prescience when examining a group comprised of people with divergent backgrounds, ages and socioeconomic status such as those affiliated with LGBTQ rights and AIDS activism. She continues:

Contrary to the assumptions and expectations of any experts on social movements, the focus on identity building and identity elaboration has not proved to be paralyzing or divisive... the unity and diversity of the gay community seem inextricably connected."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Armstrong, Elizabeth. *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994*: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

Following the Stonewall Riots of 1969, gay rights activism became invigorated with a heightened focus on sexual liberation and individualism. Thus, gay rights groups were exclusive by design with self-described radicals helming the movement. A function of this radical orientation often led to an overt hostility or at least skepticism towards straight allies, some within the movement invoked the pejorative term “breeder” to describe them.<sup>103</sup> Whereas the post-Stonewall gay rights groups of the seventies established themselves as viable political operations actively fighting back against societal persecution, the onset of the AIDS epidemic naturally had implications for the organizing principles of the group as well as its demographic composition.

The emergence of AIDS, which was initially believed to exclusively take the lives of non-heteronormative men, required a shift of priorities and focus for LGBTQ activism generally. The exponential increase in deaths generated a desperate need to expand the coalition fighting on behalf of LGBTQ social justice to be more inclusive to its straight allies.<sup>104</sup> The AIDS epidemic marked a clear temporal break from the previous era of exclusionary gay activism and history. In other words, for people who lived prior to the initial onset of the epidemic, there was a time *before* AIDS and a time *after* AIDS. This era of activism, with its increasingly diverse array of activists, shifting set of priorities and the new constant threat of disease, had serious implications for the cultural identity of the Orlando LGBTQ community and as well as LGBTQ communities across the country.

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<sup>103</sup> Silversides, Ann. *AIDS Activist: Michael Lynch and the Politics of Community* (Ontario: Between the Lines Books: Toronto, 2003), 12.

<sup>104</sup> Epstein, Steven. *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 8.

This new coalition of AIDS activists was comprised of people of all walks of life including nurses, teachers, doctors, survivors and everyone in between. As the virus itself did not discriminate along socioeconomic lines or according to race, age, or religion, neither did this new group of activists. With proximity to death being a common thread, the widespread broken-heartedness felt by so many accompanied by corresponding collective grief became the essence of this group's solidarity. This new era that arose out of an AIDS epidemic accelerated a process of mainstreaming the mantle of not only LGBTQ rights but the rights of all of those living with HIV and AIDS, their medical care providers, as well as their loved ones.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, there were certain events such as the Ryan White saga that helped to humanize the AIDS epidemic and shift the general perception from "the gay disease" to a legitimate public health concern. Another factor that helped increase awareness and acceptance of HIV and AIDS issues which had tremendous implications for local health clinics is the awareness of public figures who become diagnosed despite the perception of some that pose the legitimate question of "...why a disease becomes important only when a celebrity gets it," others who work in this field conceive of the public focus differently.<sup>105</sup> Bill Millford, director of the Tallahassee AIDS hotline described the effect of Magic Johnson's HIV diagnoses as such:

I'm sorry that it's one man's tragedy that has inspired so many other people to seek education for themselves, but truthfully speaking it's been difficult to find a person that the majority of people can identify with, so now they say, 'I've got a friend who's HIV infected.'"<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Blumfield, Michael. "Suddenly, AIDS Seems Scariest: Magic Johnson's Announcement Spurs People throughout Florida to Call Aids Counselors and Clinics." *The Orlando Sentinel*. accessed March 29, 2019, A1. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/southeast-news/docview/277965413/E2835FF89F954EF8PQ/2?accountid=10003>.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, A1.

Upon Johnson's discovery that he was HIV positive during a routine checkup, he made a public announcement and subsequently retired from professional basketball.<sup>107</sup> Following this news, many of central Florida's public health clinics announced a surge of people seeking information on AIDS and getting tested.<sup>108</sup> Laboratory tests in the state increased by approximately 20% which can be traced directly to increased public awareness according to the state's Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services.<sup>109</sup>

When examining the rate of AIDS/HIV diagnoses in the United States, there was a consistent increase in the rate of newly diagnosed cases until 1993 when rates began to diminish for the first time since the initial outbreak.<sup>110</sup> There are a few apparent concurrent events that this trend line can be correlated with including significant increases in state and federal spending, and the shift in perception from this being merely "the gay plague" to a widespread public health crisis.<sup>111</sup> Further, public information campaigns helped to educate the populace about the ways in which HIV and AIDS are contracted, spread and prevented have helped educate many ultimately contributing to the reduction of new diagnoses.

With the ability now to look back as years have passed since the height of the AIDS/HIV epidemic, individuals, as well as local communities and the country at large, have had to reckon

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<sup>107</sup> Johnson, Earvin, and William Novak. *My Life* (New York, NY: Fawcett Books, 1992), xi.

<sup>108</sup> "AIDS Testing on the Rise in Florida's Star Revelation Moves Heterosexuals to Act." *The Orlando Sentinel*, November 28, 1991, B7 sec, accessed March 29, 2019, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/southeastnews/docview/277956049/CC2493F2624E4B0EPQ/108?accountid=10003>.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, B7.

<sup>110</sup> "HIV and AIDS in the US: 1981-2000." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 1 June 2001, pp. 430-434, [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm).

<sup>111</sup> McKay, Richard A., *Patient Zero and the Making of the AIDS Epidemic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 265.



with this tragedy in profound ways. The idea of widespread loss afflicting so many over any expanse of time is bound to have implications for one's understanding of their identity as well as the identity of the broader community. With the complicated experience of the AIDS epidemic being comprised of militant political activism and widespread mourning, increased acceptance of sexually marginalized groups has allowed more opportunities for identity formation since the peak of the epidemic. The way the legacy of AIDS manifests in communities takes shape in the form of the organizations, groups, and practices that arose out of a need that was met in the most adverse of circumstances. The importance of this era for future crises has been reinforced time and time again. Whether its institutions such as Orlando's GLBT Center which was served as an organizing and leadership hub in the wake of the PULSE tragedy or the counseling resources offered by Hope and Help, the AIDS epidemic has left an indelible mark on the community. It has shown to have profound implications for the collective consciousness and cultural identity for both the LGBTQ community and the broader community at large.

In Dagmawi Woubshet's analysis of the vast number of AIDS-related losses in 1980s Ethiopia, Woubshet states, "there is no constituency as formative as the dead."<sup>112</sup> The most sustaining legacy of the AIDS era in Orlando is a testament to the power of this sentiment. Perhaps the greatest way of mourning the deceased is the continual honoring of their lives through service. There is no better embodiment of that ethos than the breadth of coalition built to fight for LGBTQ rights and the programs and services offered in the years following the peak of AIDS in the early years of the 1990s. The most glaring example of this coincides with the aforementioned

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<sup>112</sup> Woubshet, Dagmawi, *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), x.

heart-rending tragedy at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in 2016 where the painful parallels were all too familiar. In the wake of the shooting, the second-largest in American history, the makeshift memorials that arose across town to mourn the loss of life were both simultaneously beautiful and harrowing. The coupling of widespread grief with the demand for decisive action is a combination of conflicting emotions that this community has had the unfortunate history of knowing intimately through its experience with AIDS decades earlier.

The GLBT Center of Central Florida or as its colloquially called, The Center, a local grassroots non-profit that was described in an earlier chapter that was integral during the AIDS epidemic, immediately became the rallying point in the immediate aftermath of the PULSE shooting. Volunteers and counselors flocked to the small non-profit to help those suffering process the magnitude of what they experienced.<sup>113</sup> Upon receiving the early morning phone call, Denisse Lamas, a University of Central Florida adjunct professor of social work, was one person in a network comprised of thirty counselors who lent their services in the wake of tragedy.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Carlos Guillermo Smith with Equality Florida stated, “The Center was the first place most of us went to, essentially, for our grassroots response from the entire community, not just LGBTQ, but really the Orlando community as a whole.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Young, Jessica Bryce. “The Center’s Terry DeCarlo promises counseling services to anyone affected by shooting at Pulse Nightclub.” *Orlando Weekly*, June 12, 2016, accessed March 7, 2020, <https://www.orlandoweekly.com/Blogs/archives/2016/06/12/the-centers-terry-decarlo-promises-counseling-services-to-anyone-affected-by-shooting-at-pulse-nightclub>

<sup>114</sup> Cole, Laura J. “Helpers and Healers: Not surprisingly, of the thousands who responded after Pulse, many have a UCF connection. Here, in their words, are their stories” *Pegasus*, Fall 2016, accessed March 7, 2020, <https://www.ucf.edu/pegasus/orlando-pulse-shooting/>

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

Smith's assertion conveys two crucial components of what this thesis argues is the positive aspect of the legacy of the AIDS epidemic in Orlando. The first being the integral role of organizations that were born out of necessity during the AIDS epidemic, such as The Center, played when confronted with another tragedy. Having a preexisting infrastructure already in place to assist with coordinating volunteers, raising money, and helping process grief proved to be immensely helpful as the community struggled to cope with its grief. The second aspect of the role of mourning and activism that was evident here is the fact that the broader community, having learned about the plight of LGBTQ community through the AIDS epidemic and since, was already mobilized in solidarity alongside their fellow non-heteronormative community members. The community-wide sense of grief spread from the city's professional sports teams to businesses, to local schools and beyond.<sup>116</sup> Orlando's mourning was widespread and ultimately extended to the state level with the official declaration of June 12<sup>th</sup> as Pulse Remembrance Day – a sense of so solidarity so widespread took years to establish during the initial onset of the AIDS epidemic.

Even though the number of deaths resulting from AIDS or AIDS-related illnesses began to steady in 1993, the sense of grief shared among those it left behind has never disappeared. Memorialized in symbolic quilts or cultural works like movies and books, the grief shared by so many for AIDS victims remains a persistent reminder of the pain and trauma endured. The transformation of that trauma into something concrete and constructive such as the organizations that were formed during the AIDS epidemic but remained in its aftermath to become pillars of the

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<sup>116</sup> "Magic Honor Pulse Shooting Victims." *Orlando Sentinel*. October 28, 2016, C6, accessed March 7, 2020, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1833027889?accountid=10003>.

community is one of the most important legacies of that era. Grassroots groups that met in bars and organized protests became crucial components to the broader cultural identity of the community. The pervasive sense of loss as an informative motivator to come together, grieve, and ultimately demand action became the mourning process at first during the AIDS epidemic and later during the PULSE tragedy. In *Living, Loving and Loss*, Brad DeFord refers to mourning as, “a form of exploring, during which we get to know again a world that has been irrevocably changed by our loss.”<sup>117</sup> In this sense, it is impossible to consider the cultural identity of the LGBTQ community of Orlando without placing it squarely in the context of its complicated experience with AIDS and HIV. The darkness associated with loss is coupled with hope generated by those who came together to demand their just place in society. The hope inherent in the act of protest of LGBTQ rights activists is coupled with the grief shared by so many. Ultimately, it’s juxtapositions such as these inherent in the mourning process that have proven to be so resilient in the intervening years since the AIDS epidemic that have remained intact in order to shape the unique character of the LGBTQ community of Orlando and LGBTQ communities across the country.

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<sup>117</sup> DeFord, Brad. *Living, Loving and Loss: The Interplay of Intimacy, Sexuality and Grief*, (New York, Baywood Publishing Company, 2017).

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