

From AIDS to Covid-19

written by Lizz Toledo

April 21, 2020



Photo: Ricky Flores

From a presentation at the online press conference, "Fighting Racism During the

Coronavirus Crisis,” on April 4, 2020.

In 1981, a mysterious illness began to appear in the gay community. One of the first and most noticeable symptoms was Kaposi’s Sarcoma (KC), which created purplish lesions on the skin of the afflicted.

Because the first people diagnosed with the syndrome were gay men, many in the ruling class started calling it “Gay Cancer.” It wasn’t until the latter part of 1982 that leaders and the media stopped calling it this. But the next name chosen was just as bad and even more stigmatizing to the sufferers: gay-related immunodeficiency syndrome (GRID).

In addition to KC, a cluster of gay men in Southern California and New York City were also getting sick with pneumocystis pneumonia. This led to the diagnosis of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Today many researchers believe that KC and AIDS were and are two separate epidemics.

The attitude of the government, including then-President Ronald Reagan, was that the affected appeared to be only gay men and intravenous drug users — people who didn’t deserve any special attention, much less support. It wasn’t until hemophiliacs developed PCP pneumonia and other opportunistic infections that the government suddenly felt it should respond.

We must never forget Reagan’s shameful legacy, the lack of leadership he showed in the fight against AIDS. Reagan is to blame for the thousands who died and continue to die as a result of his cowardice, his fear of the powerful religious right and the “immoral majority,” who gave Reagan his road to the White House.

These included the misogynist Rev. Jerry Falwell, who used AIDS as the tool and gay men as the target for the politics of fear, hate and discrimination. Falwell said,

“AIDS is the wrath of god upon homosexuals.” And Reagan’s communications director Patrick Buchanan stated that AIDS was “nature’s revenge on gay men.”

On May 31, 1987, as his second term was coming to an end, Reagan finally spoke on the issue of the day. But not before 36,058 people in the U.S. had been diagnosed with AIDS and 20,849 had died.

Although the Centers for Disease Control reported that HIV could not be transmitted by casual contact and Reagan knew this, he continued to fan irrational fear by saying: “And yet medicine has not come forth unequivocally and said, ‘This we know for a fact, that it is safe.’ And until they do, I think we just have to do the best we can with this problem. I can understand both sides of it.” By both sides he meant parents who were demanding that children with AIDS be kicked out of their schools — including kindergarteners.

That is what I remember Reagan for, wiping out a whole generation of gay men, many of whom were my dear friends! When I visit a gay bar today, I’m struck by the lack of gay men my age. Most are in their twenties, thirties, some in their forties, or in their seventies. Very few are in their fifties or sixties. A whole generation is gone due to Reagan’s unequivocal indifference towards the lives of the poor and the oppressed.

It was the activists and freedom fighters of the 1980s and 1990s and even today that made the U.S. government provide housing, health care, financial assistance, needle exchange, treatment and many of the services that people with AIDS have today, though it is still far from sufficient. The fight is not over.

Today we see much the same murderous response from the ruling class and all its cronies to Covid-19. They show the same callousness towards all of us that they did to people with AIDS. Some on the right want to blame Covid-19 on the so-called “acceptance” of the gay community. Racist 45 started calling it the “Chinese virus”

and condoned violence against our Chinese and other Asian siblings.

We can't depend on them. We have to stand up for each other, especially the most oppressed, the prisoners, the homeless, the poor, the immigrants, including those being held in concentration camps, and for the working class in general.

We will not die for Wall Street! We demand:

Freedom for all prisoners, including political prisoners;

Provision of a healthy, safe place for released prisoners;

Release of immigrants from all concentration camps;

Unemployment insurance or income for all workers;

Health care for all;

Increase in food stamps;

Increase in Social Security Insurance benefits and for the disabled;

Personal protective equipment (PPE) for all workers required to stay on the job;

Paid medical leave for all.

