

**Telling the story of AIDS in Brooklyn : how and why we created  
"AIDS/Brooklyn" and what we discovered about AIDS in our Borough.**

**Contributors**

Brooklyn Historical Society (Brooklyn, New York, N.Y.)

**Publication/Creation**

[1992?]

**Persistent URL**

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/k4e7py54>

**License and attribution**

Conditions of use: it is possible this item is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s).



Wellcome Collection  
183 Euston Road  
London NW1 2BE UK  
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722  
E [library@wellcomecollection.org](mailto:library@wellcomecollection.org)  
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

# • TELLING THE STORY OF AIDS IN BROOKLYN •

How and Why We Created "AIDS/BROOKLYN" and What We Discovered About AIDS in Our Borough

## THE MOTIVATION: WHY DO AN EXHIBITION ON AIDS?

"AIDS/BROOKLYN" was conceived by David M. Kahn, the Society's executive director, who felt that museum exhibitions that have been created in response to the AIDS crisis have not dealt with the disease in a way that is comprehensible to the general public.

"Museums have been addressing this epidemic by presenting works of art that express various artists' feelings about AIDS," said David. "I wanted to capture, in a concrete and direct manner, what the daily lives of people affected by AIDS were like."

Personal circumstances were behind the creation of the exhibition as well. In March of 1991, David's lover, Ron Wogman, who had been sick for many years, died of an AIDS-related illness. After Ron's death, David put together a memorial scrapbook. He found, however, when he spoke to friends about how they reacted to the death of someone they had taken care of, that instead of preserving memories, many of them had systematically discarded all items that reminded them of AIDS.

"I felt this was an understandable response," said David, "but after hearing of this phenomenon several times, the historian in me became alarmed. How would future generations know what this crisis had been like? Who would preserve the material culture of AIDS?"

"AIDS/BROOKLYN" presents the material aspects of the AIDS crisis by displaying items such as a hand-made get well card from a child, a broken heart pin created in memory of a deceased son, activist buttons and posters, medical devices and pills used by PWAs (People With AIDS), memorial quilts, artwork created by AIDS patients, safer sex manuals and much more. But the exhibition also goes beyond the concrete level, by exploring the personal, intimate stories of individuals.



Exhibition interviewee Kristy Fernandez, a seven-year-old PWA who lives in Bedford-Stuyvesant. She is believed to have contracted AIDS from her mother, who died when she was four.

## THE FOCUS: HONORING THE LIVING

Some of the most widely known methods of addressing the impact of AIDS — such as making quilts and observing the annual Day Without Art — involve remembering people who have died. Breaking away from this format, the exhibition instead focuses on the people who are living with AIDS or the HIV virus, through the component of mourning and memorializing the dead is included.

"While it is important to remember the people we have lost to AIDS, it's too easy for an exhibition just to focus on those who've died, it's an approach that is very moving and guarantees a strong impact," said Robert Rosenberg, project director. "We also wanted to honor those who are living with the virus and make the statement that being HIV positive or having AIDS does not mean a quick death sentence."

He said that it is estimated that in the U.S., more than 75% of all people who have become infected with HIV since the beginning of the epidemic are still alive.

To emphasize the focus on living with HIV, Exhibition Designer Shauna Mosseri, who also designed the Society's permanent exhibition, created, in the exhibition space, simulated environments in which Brooklynites effected by AIDS live out their daily lives: a brownstone stoop, the interior of an apartment, a hospital room, a community room and an activist rally.

## I • N • T • R • O • D • U • C • T • I • O • N

The following is a guide to "AIDS/BROOKLYN," which tells the behind-the-scenes story of the exhibition, explores some of its highlights and explains how we tried to implement our goals.

The Brooklyn Historical Society has spent the past 10 years transforming itself from an institution that mainly documented the past into a dynamic museum, library and education center with a strong emphasis on contemporary life. A host of innovative rotating exhibitions have been displayed on the Society's walls that explore, in depth, various facets of contemporary Brooklyn.

Usually these exhibitions examine the stories of ethnic groups or specific neighborhoods, as did the highly successful exhibition "Por Qué Brooklyn? Our Borough's Latino Voices," which ran through most of 1992. Now, in its newest exhibition, "AIDS/BROOKLYN," the Society is looking at Brooklyn life in a different way: by focusing on one issue — AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) — and its impact on people in every part of the borough.

"AIDS/BROOKLYN" takes an approach to representing the illness that no other museum yet has: letting the viewer enter into the daily lives of people affected by AIDS and discover places, people, events and objects special to them.

Our goals for the exhibition are that it will raise awareness of the issues faced by people infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the virus believed to cause AIDS), honor the lives of those who are dealing with the AIDS epidemic, clear up stereotypes and misconceptions, provide information on how to protect oneself from HIV infection and encourage people to become involved in the multifaceted movement to help alleviate and end the crisis.

The exhibition will be on display in the gallery of The Brooklyn Historical Society at 128 Pierrepont Street in Brooklyn Heights, through the end of 1993. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday, 12 noon to 5 pm.

Public programs and guided visits for school groups have been created to supplement the exhibition. For details, see the Society's newsletter or call (718) 624-0890 for more information.

After the exhibition has run its course, the Society will continue to be committed to collecting materials related to AIDS in Brooklyn. Objects that have been donated will remain in our collection and oral history interviews will be available for public use in the library.

**"There's still a lot of life left and a lot of joy to be derived from it. There's still very good times to be had. There's no reason to be hopeless or helpless or anything like that."**

— Exhibition interviewee A.N., who wished to remain anonymous.

She is a 48-year-old African American with AIDS living in Crown Heights, who contracted the virus from a former boyfriend.

## • HOW WE DID IT: THE SEARCH FOR INTERVIEWEES AND OBJECTS •

To document the impact of AIDS on the people of Brooklyn, the Society departed from its usual practice of appointing a scholar-curator as project director and instead chose Robert Rosenberg, a 37-year-old, Brooklyn-based documentary film producer who is very involved with the AIDS crisis both professionally and personally. He has recently completed a film on health-care workers who deal with AIDS, and is best known for his Emmy-award-winning film *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community*. Both films make use of the interviewing techniques that he employed in researching "AIDS/BROOKLYN." A number of people close to him are sick with or have died from AIDS.

Assisting with the interviewing process was Robert Semler, a New York University doctoral candidate in Performance Studies. Kathryn Pope, research assistant, made initial contacts with the AIDS community.

The Society's staff played an active role in the planning as well. Ellen Snyder-Greiner, former chief curator, helped launch the project during the first half of 1992, before she left the Society to be a full-time mother. Daniel Barron, curator of collections, visited people's homes to collect objects for use in the exhibition. Dwanalyn Reece, who came on board as chief curator in November, 1992, coordinated the final stages of the project and assisted in the writing of the exhibition's text and label copy.

The groundwork for the exhibition was established by a Community Advisory Committee and a Scholarly Advisory Committee; both provided guidance at every stage of planning and added their insight and advice in the writing of text and label copy.

The search for subjects and objects was greatly facilitated by the community advisers, who included PWAs, HIV-positive but healthy individuals, community service workers, activists, volunteers, teenage AIDS-

peer educators and those who work with people of color, injection drug users, the gay community, women and children. These helpful people used their contacts to assist us in finding Brooklynites affected by the AIDS crisis.

Flyers explaining what and whom the project was looking for were printed in English, Spanish and Creole, the most common languages spoken in Brooklyn. The flyers were sent to community organizations and health-care facilities that deal with AIDS, to be posted and distributed to patients and clients. Dozens of follow-up calls had to be made in order to ensure that flyers had been received and disseminated.

"Everyone we spoke to in these organizations was well intentioned and very supportive of the project, but we found that they were incredibly overworked and often did not have the time to help us out," said Robert Rosenberg.

The search for interviewees and objects was also publicized in the press and in the Society's newsletter.

Once the right selection of people was found, the project's staff visited them in their residences, interviewed them about their experiences with AIDS and requested donations or loans of objects that would help tell their stories. Several people who donated objects were not interviewed.

"We found that it was often the items that people thought we would have no interest in that were perfect for the exhibition," said Daniel. "They would take out fancy family treasures, but what we needed were ordinary objects from daily life such as a favorite baseball cap of a PWA or a stuffed animal that had belonged to a sick child."

Tom McGovern, photography editor at the Village Voice, returned to the homes of the people we had interviewed to photograph them for the exhibition. His moving, personal photos are an integral component of the exhibition.

## THE GOAL: DOCUMENTING THE FACE OF AIDS IN BROOKLYN

What is the face of AIDS in Brooklyn? In the process of creating "AIDS/BROOKLYN," the Society discovered that there are thousands of faces, many hiding in the shadows, a few standing proud in the public eye, a large number living in denial, others in despair, some meeting the challenges of each new day with inspiring hope and vigor.

How can one museum represent all these faces? This was the mission that led the project's organizers to distribute multilingual flyers, make hundreds of phone calls and travel around the borough into the communities most heavily affected by the epidemic and into the residences of those whose lives were touched by the virus.

We were not able to reach every type of person that we had hoped to interview. It was relatively easy to find gay white men living in areas like Brooklyn Heights and Park Slope who had AIDS, as many of them picked up their phones and volunteered to share their stories. It took more time and effort to locate Latinos, African Americans and injection drug users (those who inject illegal drugs) who were willing to identify themselves as PWAs or people who are HIV positive but not ill. We could not find any people willing to be interviewed who were currently using injection drugs or were homeless.

It also became clear that most of the PWAs and the still healthy HIV-positive people who were willing to talk openly and be photographed were those who had responded to knowledge of their infection by improving their lives and/or taking an active role in promoting awareness about AIDS. This is not how everyone reacts to finding out they have been exposed to HIV; many people become despondent and many are very secretive about their HIV status.

Though the group of people who appear in the exhibition are not a complete cross section of the community that is affected by AIDS in Brooklyn, many of them were aware of, and spoke about, the issues faced by those who were more difficult to contact. Their comments and opinions on these issues are included in the exhibition. We hope that our visitors will help fill in some of the missing voices and experiences by using the interactive materials built into "AIDS/BROOKLYN" to tell the stories of their experiences with AIDS.

The people that you will see in the exhibition include lesbians, gay men, heterosexuals, Latinos, African Americans, Caribbean Americans, members of various other ethnic groups, people of different religions, former injection drug users, a teenager and a child. They represent different types of people involved in the AIDS crisis: PWAs; those who are HIV positive but not ill; family members, lovers and friends of PWAs or those who have died; health care workers; community service providers; activists; support group leaders, educators and volunteers.

Sadly, two of the PWAs we interviewed have died: Ivan Weinstein, a gay man from Flatbush who worked as a stage manager for the AIDS Theatre Project and William Sandoval, a South Brooklyn resident who was a former injection drug user involved with clean needle exchange programs. The voices of these two men live on in the exhibition.



Exhibition interviewee Philip Goldman, a 52-year-old gay PWA who lives in Flatbush.



## WHAT WE DISCOVERED: AIDS AND THE COMMUNITIES OF BROOKLYN



Exhibition interviewee Christopher Henry, a 26-year-old, HIV-positive gay man, on the block where he lives in Crown Heights.

Why examine AIDS in this borough? AIDS in Brooklyn, many believe, is the face of the epidemic in the near future. The spread of AIDS here is indicative of what is happening in urban areas throughout the country: the group that is experiencing the most rapid increase in new cases is no longer gay men; now the disease is spreading quickly through poorer communities, where it affects injection drug users, women and children.

Of the five boroughs of New York City, Brooklyn is second to Manhattan in its number of reported AIDS cases. Yet the issues and challenges faced by Brooklynites with AIDS are often quite different from those of their Manhattan counterparts.

We found that in Brooklyn there is often a strong feeling of isolation because people are farther away from the organizations that are believed to provide the best services and health care for AIDS patients. Also, many Brooklynites live in communities that are not as accepting of PWAs as certain neighborhoods in Manhattan, such as Greenwich Village and Chelsea.

On the other hand, there are strong family and community ties that keep people in Brooklyn. This becomes apparent as one examines the family portraits, wedding photos and memorial objects in the exhibition.

The exhibition makes the point that though some sections of the borough are inundated with many more AIDS cases than others, PWAs and HIV-positive people exist in every neighborhood, sometimes openly, more often secretly.

The responses of different communities to AIDS are examined. Some neighborhoods have been accepting and have opened the doors of churches, synagogues and community centers to support groups for PWAs and parents who have lost children to the disease. Others have turned their backs on PWAs; several landlords have threatened to evict infected tenants.

In neighborhoods that are already hard hit by poverty and fragmented families, AIDS exacerbates these problems. People who are inexperienced with political mobilization are often shut out of their access to vital services, facilities and information.

As diverse as the experience of AIDS is, there are things that our interviewees have in common: dreams, anxieties, families, memories, items that they cherish and favorite activities.



Exhibition interviewee Mildred Pearson (right), a 51-year-old woman who lives in Williamsburg and founded Mother's Love, a support group for mothers of PWAs, after her son died of an AIDS-related illness.

## PROTECTING PEOPLE'S HEALTH: PROVIDING PREVENTION INFORMATION

It became apparent as we spoke with people affected by this illness that there still is a great need in the borough's communities for more information about methods of preventing AIDS and for new ways of disseminating knowledge to the people who need it most. We realized that it was essential for the Society, as an educational institution addressing this topic, to become a resource that provides the most accurate and up-to-date information on HIV prevention.

The project's organizers had many discussions among themselves and with consultants about how to address commonly asked questions such as the following: Who is at risk? What exactly does safer sex entail? How can a drug user properly disinfect needles that are being shared?

The conclusion was that it is not appropriate for a museum to play the role of expert on matters about which other institutions are more knowledgeable. Instead, we decided to provide a forum for the display of the materials on these subjects that have been created by established AIDS service organizations. Flyers, pamphlets and posters are on display in the exhibition; several of them, along with condoms, can be taken home by visitors.

## A FILMMAKERS TOUCH: ADDING A VIDEO COMPONENT

To supplement the exhibition, a collection of videos dealing with issues related to AIDS will be playing continually, directly outside the exhibition space. The videos include appearances on local and national television programs by exhibition interviewees as well as tapes about safer sex, memorial videos of PWAs, scenes from documentary films and more.

## PROMOTING INVOLVEMENT: VOLUNTEERISM AND ACTIVISM

For a variety of reasons, many people have become AIDS volunteers and/or activists. While some Brooklynites work with agencies and groups based in Manhattan, others have started their own organizations and groups closer to home. Volunteers throughout Brooklyn have been responsible for numerous activities including providing food, emotional support, help around the house and companionship to PWAs.

Several major AIDS demonstrations have occurred in Brooklyn and activists travel throughout the borough spreading the word about safer sex, handing out clean needles and bleach to injection drug users and mobilizing people politically.

Information on organizations that you can become involved in is included in the exhibition.

## THE BIGGER PICTURE: AIDS BEYOND BROOKLYN

To place Brooklyn's AIDS epidemic within a larger context, an entire panel in the exhibition is covered with a timeline of pivotal local, national and global events in the AIDS epidemic.

It includes milestones such as the first documentation of an AIDS-related illness, the discovery of the virus causing AIDS, the founding of the major AIDS service organizations and activist groups, the disclosures of HIV infection by celebrities such as Rock Hudson and Magic Johnson, yearly reports on cumulative AIDS cases as well as events from the lives of the exhibition's interviewees.

Visitors are invited to contribute their personal experiences with AIDS to the timeline by filling out interactive cards.

## INFORMING THE PUBLIC: ELIMINATING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT AIDS

Our research informed us that there are still many incorrect beliefs being spread about AIDS. The exhibition attempts to counteract these with the inclusion of a "Facts and Fictions" display, which provides up-to-date, scientifically accepted wisdom about the illness.

This section was also designed to change negative attitudes that some people have towards PWAs, such as the opinion that those who contracted the disease through sex or injection drug use are to blame for what happened to them, while those who got it through blood transfusions or were born to parents with AIDS are "innocent victims."

The exhibition also contains a dictionary that explains some of the terminology that is frequently used in discussions and writings about AIDS.

## A.C.K.N.O.W.L.E.D.G.E.M.E.N.T.S

"AIDS/BROOKLYN" was able to happen because of a very special group of people: interviewees who were willing to reveal information about the most intimate parts of their lives, advisors who were generous with their time and wisdom, object donors who loaned and gave cherished possessions, AIDS-service workers who were patient and willing when approached for help and the people at the foundations and corporations who made the decision to provide financial backing, without which the exhibition would never have come to be.

We don't have room to name the hundreds of wonderful people who helped out along the way, such as the receptionists at the agencies who forwarded our calls to the appropriate people or the doctors, nurses and community service workers who pointed us in the right directions, but we are grateful to each and every one of them. Following are some of the main participants in the project. Thanks to everyone for their invaluable time and efforts!

### ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWEES AND/OR OBJECT DONORS:

A.N.  
Deborah Abraham  
Lois Baron  
Mary Barone  
Melinda Brownman  
Philip Coleman  
Jerome Comer  
Melissa De La Cruz  
Stephanie Douglas  
Carney Fernandez  
Kristy Fernandez  
Alan Fleishman  
Estelle Haber  
Jason Hargrove  
Christopher Henry  
Marilyn John  
Ruth Jones  
Milagros Kennebrew  
Maria Leppert  
Rick Maher  
Ed Marlan  
Roger Mohovich  
Adolph Morchiglio  
Donna Mulcahy  
Sr. Elizabeth Mullane  
Luis Nieves  
Barbara Norris  
Maria Palazzo  
Mildred Pearson  
Puma Perl  
Kenneth Post  
Sandra Richardson  
Robert Ripp  
Dolores Rivera  
Rita Rodriguez  
Beverly Rotter  
Randy Rotter  
William Sandoval  
Dr. Douglas Sepkowitz  
Sam Taylor  
Alice Terson  
Cheryl Wagner  
Ivan Weinstein  
Shelly Weiss

### ORGANIZATIONAL DONORS:

ACT UP  
Brooklyn AIDS Task Force  
Brooklyn Dance Consortium  
Caribbean Women's Health Association  
CPHC Health Center  
Gay Men's Health Crisis  
Haitian Coalition on AIDS  
Interfaith Medical Center  
Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services  
Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center  
Life Force  
Lutheran Medical Center  
Mother's Love  
Planned Parenthood of New York  
Project Reach Youth  
St. Vincent's Hospital  
United Parents Clinic  
Woodhull Hospital

### COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Celene Durr, Association for Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment  
Bill Dobbs, Art Positive and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power  
Steve Cohen, Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center  
Dorothy Ellis, Project Reach Youth (PRY)  
Beth Harrington, PRY  
John Harrington, formerly of the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force  
John Hanchett, PWA Coalition  
Jomo McFarlane, PRY  
Peter McGarry, Body Positive  
Sheri Venocur, Brooklyn Heights Synagogue AIDS Committee  
Patrick O'Connell, Visual AIDS Day Without Art  
Puma Perl, LifeForce  
Miguel Salicrup, Brooklyn AIDS Task Force (BATF)  
Gloria Smith, BATF  
Elizabeth Solomon, Women and AIDS Resource Network  
Simon Watson, Simon Watson Gallery

### SCHOLARLY ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Elizabeth Fee, Johns Hopkins University  
Morris Vogel, Temple University  
Genald Oppenheimer, Brooklyn College

### PROJECT DIRECTOR:

Robert Rosenberg

### EXHIBITION DESIGNER:

Shanna Mosseri

### EXHIBITION INSTALLER:

Lawrence Arden

### THE BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY STAFF:

David M. Kahn, executive director  
Daniel Barron, curator of collections  
Fabiana Chis, curator of education  
Laura Kleinman, education intern  
Jill Levey, director of public programs  
Laura Miller, director of school programs  
Dwanda Lynn Reese, chief curator  
Ellen Snyder-Greiner, former chief curator

### RESEARCHER:

Robert Semler

### RESEARCH ASSISTANT:

Kathryn Pope

### PHOTOGRAPHER:

Tom McGovern

### FUNDERS:

New York Council for the Humanities  
New York State Council on the Arts  
American Express  
Joshua Macy, Jr. Foundation  
Fund for the City of New York