

Jeremy Norman

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A History of the early days of Crusaid.

It is hard for us to recall what our thoughts and feelings were on the subject of Aids ten or more years ago. I am not sure if the word had yet been coined. Those of us in England who had friends in America or had travelled there were beginning to sense a fear and dread. Many little Englanders of my acquaintance still insisted that this Gay disease was just American hysteria and clearly had no relevance to us normal English gay men. How wrong they were, but no one wants to hear the bad news, especially when that news hits straight at the heart of a cherished lifestyle

I had just been to see the play by Larry Kramer "A normal Heart" at the Royal Court, I think it might have even been produced by Derek Granger (Now of Crusaid),. I have never been so moved or been made to feel so impotently angry by anything on the stage or screen. I came away from the theatre with a determination to act.

At this stage I had only known two victims of the new disease, an American interior designer who had died of a mysterious pneumonia, and a Key West friend called Kit Woolcott, English by birth who had gone to live in USA. They and the frightening evidence of the Larry Kramer play were enough to spur me to action. No one had ever asked me for a donation or for help in any way. As far as I knew the only charity in the field was the newly formed Terrence Higgins Trust. I reasoned that my strengths lay in my social and business contacts and therefore my ability to influence opinion and raise both money and consciousness.

I spoke to my friend and business partner, Richard Taylor, who was immediately supportive and introduced me to his friend David McFarlane who was thinking along similar lines. David had already got together with a group of friends and wanted to start a fund-raising charity on the same lines as the one I proposed. They were looking for someone to take on the job of Chairman, someone who could front the organisation and who was not afraid of being publicly associated with this pariah of a disease. It transpired that David was a close friend of Kit Woolcott and wanted to do something positive in his memory which was another point of contact. I suspect that the choice of me as Chairman had a lot to do with the fact that all the others involved had jobs which might have been prejudiced by any publicity associating them with Aids. I am now and was then self-employed and fully "Out" to everyone in my life, both business and private so I had nothing to loose or to hide.

The launch of the new Charity was held at Leighton House in Kensington courtesy of Stephen Jones (RIP) the Curator of the museum. I made an impassioned speech to about four hundred invited guests which quite shocked everyone with its dire predictions of disaster to come. People even told me not to be hysterical and that I was over reacting. Sadly they were wrong, oh so wrong!

The first committee of Crusaid comprised myself as Founder Chairman and David McFarlane, Geoff Henning, Andrew Stone (Our legal adviser), Anthony Keith (RIP), Martin

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Sherwood, Patrick Morris (RIP?), and Nick Allum. They were all friends of David and Geoff and hitherto unknown to me. I quickly found we had certain differences of approach and a fundamental disagreement as to where the charity should be positioned. They wanted to play down any gay associations and appeal to the respectable mainstream charity world of Opera first nights and film premiers. Whilst I had no objections to this area of fund-raising I felt that Aids was in reality affecting mainly gay men and it was to them that we should primarily be addressing our message. Soon after the launch of Crusaid, Marguerite Littman had launched Aids Crisis Trust, specifically to seek funds from the fashionable charity circuit, I saw no need for us to compete directly.

Crusaid started the first individual hardship fund, chaired by Anthony Keith. We all knew of the deprivations and rejection that gay men with Aids were facing. The hardship fund was for me at the core of our *raison d'être*. It provided immediate cash for small luxuries, a trip home to see parents or a fridge in hospital for foods lovingly brought in by friends to tempt a non-existent appetite.

Andrew Stone was an executor of the will of Fred Kobler and we had a legacy of half a million pounds to put to good use, we set up a subcommittee to make recommendations. We came up with the idea of the Kobler Centre which is still today provides top quality outpatient care for many with HIV in pleasant friendly surroundings. Having visited a similar clinic in Paris, we have much to be grateful for. Andrew was key to the early development of Crusaid not only through his access to Fred Kobler's money but also with his wise legal counsel.

Now that Crusaid has established itself and continues to do such great work, we should remember the early days and the crushingly negative response we received underpinned by the unspoken opinion that "They are getting what they deserve". We should all remember how very few people, straight or gay, wished to be associated with us: it proved very difficult to find people of note to become patrons or benefactors or to help publicly in any way. Aids was not the fashionable and politically correct charity cause it has now become.

After about a year as Chairman I resigned to join the new National Aids Trust as a founder Trustee and to work with Robert Maxwell on his fund-raising committee, but that is another story. Michael Watson took over from me as Chairman and took the Charity on to new heights.

About five years ago when I was in New York a mutual friend asked Larry Kramer to dinner and I was pleased to be able to tell him the story of the founding of Crusaid and the part "A Normal Heart" played in it. His delight was evident to see and gave us both great satisfaction.

Crusaid continues to prosper and raise even larger sums for its good work, but let us not forget our past and the motivations, raw energy and mission of those early days. I hope the worst is now over and that the dying, having slowed to a trickle will finally stop, then and only then will Crusaid be able to meet for one last time and disband, a job well done. May that day come soon

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