

The following letters have been written in response to Darrell Yates Rist's "AIDS As Apocalypse: The Deadly Costs of An Obsession," an article in the October issue of Q-Notes.

Continued from page 1

relationships and derive the benefits thereof. This includes marriage, property settlements, health insurance and other heterosexual benefits of legitimacy.

3. The right to societal safeguards against harassment and discrimination, with appropriate punishment for violations.

As devastating as the AIDS epidemic has been to gays, I believe AIDS has produced new opportunities for inroads with mainstream society. If homosexuals move to redirect efforts toward civil rights issues, common sense suggests appealing to the moderate mainstream through responsible leadership and positive approaches. While AIDS has resulted in high profile opportunities for gay leadership to work within mainstream political, medical and educational institutions, public "kiss-ins" and names like ACT UP affront the very moderates to whom you appeal. We are turned off by sexual displays in our offices, parks or shopping malls, be it hetero, homo or auto.

It might be a slower process, but I believe the gay community can achieve quality of life goals by showcasing mature, constructive relationships; disenfranchising from those defending and supporting exploitive or "anything goes" lifestyles; working through political and public relations processes; and emphasizing total personal commonalities rather than sexual orientation differences. Both militancy and fatalism are dead ends.

By David Prybylo
AIDS Educator, MAP

So now we're obsessed with AIDS. Obsessed to the point we have mobilized our resources in order to form AIDS service organizations because people we care about are dying and nobody else will help. So obsessed we give our time, our money, and our energies to lobby legislators, to educate ourselves and others, to struggle with the bureaucracy of social service organizations, and to comfort those in need. Indeed, our obsession has caused gay men and lesbians to come together as a community.

Until I read Mr. Yates Rist's article, I never knew this was bad.

Mr. Yates Rist says that we, as a community, have put aside all other gay-related issues in favor of our obsession with AIDS. Surely that is news to MCSP, First Tuesday, PFLAG, MCC, and all the other non-AIDS organizations working so diligently for Charlotte's gay community. (Perhaps Charlotte is unique in this, but I wouldn't bet on it.) Is he not aware that, during the 1980s — the "AIDS years" if you will — a significant number of cities across the country have passed legislation banning discrimination based on sexual orientation? Has he been asleep while several gay men and lesbians have sued the armed forces? Does he know that some of them actually won? (Would it be too obsessive of me to point out that Leonard Matlovich, the gay man who successfully sued Air Force and a true pioneer in the arena of gay rights, recently died of complications from AIDS?)

He says that AIDS issues are diametrically opposed to gay issues. He uses as his

example the fact that an ACT-UP style organization does not exist to secure our rights for same-sex marriages. Interestingly, a judge in New York recently declared that same-sex partners are to be considered a family in that state because of the AIDS-related death of a man whose lover sued over his eviction from his rent-controlled apartment. Perhaps this legal step was not big enough for Mr. Yates Rist to consider important. I suppose San Francisco's new domestic partnership law won't do, either.

Mr. Yates Rist admonishes us for neglecting gay and lesbian youth, yet fails to note that even in this dangerous area work has progressed during the plague years. He mentions the Hetrick-Martin Institute in New York, and wasn't that formed in the '80s? And how about Project 10 in Los Angeles? Does he know about the lesbian sororities and gay fraternities that have been chartered lately? Not to mention the gay/lesbian organizations on nearly every college campus these days. And what about the gay community centers that have opened in various cities during the decade?

Mr. Yates Rist's most vulgar argument is that not enough gays are dead or will die as a result of AIDS to warrant the attention we have given. He implies that we are making mountains out of molehills. Are all of these people expendable, or are they just in the way of the bigger issues like mass weddings on the White House lawn? He claims that we are so ashamed of ourselves that we believe we deserve AIDS. It sounds to me like *he's* the one who believes that.

Mr. Yates Rist suggests that the leaders of gay activism have succumbed to the lure of AIDS obsession and have forsaken all other goals. I suggest he read the obituaries now and then. If he did he would discover that many of our leaders have not been sidetracked by AIDS, they've been killed by it. It is this loss, not our "obsession," that gives AIDS its greatest impact on gay rights.

I understand Mr. Yates Rist's frustration at the seeming lack of achievement in fundamental rights issues over the last decade. For the first ten or so years after Stonewall it seemed that tremendous strides were made in gay rights and that this momentum has been le attributes this to an obsession with AIDS. I submit that it is due both to a national trend toward conservatism and to the very nature of political and social movement.

Without a doubt, AIDS has had a colossal impact on our community. It has created a level of fear that is so fundamental it cannot be ignored. We're frightened of a virus that is so tiny we cannot see it and of a medical institution that has no answers. We're frightened of a disease that is so silent that we don't even know we have it for several years. Many of us have already lost loved ones to this disease, and we know that the end is nowhere in sight. We wonder if we may be next.

So we roll up our sleeves and fight this thing with everything we've got. We give money, time and effort. We scream, we cry, we argue, we lobby, and in the end we find that, for many of us, we are involved in a national struggle for the first time in our lives. AIDS is, for all of its senseless loss and heartache, our one common enemy. This

may be a surprise to Mr. Yates Rist, but not all of us *want* to get married. Not all of us *want* to become militant radicals. All of us do, however, want to be rid of this epidemic.

By Keith Bernard
Co-Chair, First Tuesday

I would like to commend Q-Notes for its publication of "AIDS as Apocalypse" by Darrell Yates Rist in the October issue. He spoke the unspeakable clearly, prophetically, and courageously. It is time that the gay/lesbian community as a whole considers whether perhaps other issues are at least as important as AIDS to lesbians and gay men today.

As he points out, violence against us is of epidemic proportions, as evidenced by report commissioned by the U.S. Justice Department. This same report states that lesbians and gay men are probably the most frequent victims of hate violence. In addition, we are fired from jobs, kicked out of apartments, disowned by our families, harassed by the police, forbidden legal recognition of our relationships, and our private sexual acts are illegal in one-half the states. In North Carolina, they're felonies. (Any gay person who believes he or she is not discriminated against, please call 1-800-WAKEUP!!)

A great many of us seem to be unconcerned or unconvinced by these outrages, while at the same time AIDS is on everyone's lips and minds. Why does AIDS get so many of us worked up in a way that these various forms of discrimination don't?

While many factors may be involved, I believe the primary reason is that the nongay media has given so much press to AIDS and that celebrities such as Elizabeth Taylor are doing AIDS fundraisers and speaking out on behalf of people with AIDS. Yet, while the media are filled with reports of racial and religious violence, media coverage of violence because of sexual orientation, which the government itself states is more widespread, is curiously almost non-existent. And most of our news and information come from the nongay media. Indeed, many gay people never read gay newspapers or magazines.

We are as much products of our culture as everyone else. To stake out views contrary to those of society can be difficult. Gay rights organizations such as First Tuesday must educate our own community without the cooperation of the nongay media, and with limited budgets, relatively few volunteers, and almost no recognition from our own community. At the same time, it has become "tres chic" to be involved in the fight against AIDS. Word has it that Metrolina AIDS Project has so many volunteers it doesn't know what to do with them all.

AND THAT'S GOOD. Many if not most of the gays contributing to AIDS groups, financially and otherwise, have never before contributed to a gay-related cause. They are giving their time, efforts, and money to a worthwhile cause instead of watching TV or barhopping. That is good in and of itself.

However, this influx of volunteers is promising for the cause of gay rights as well. As a board member of First Tuesday and co-chair of the North Carolina Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality, my hope is that many of these contributors whose social consciences have been awakened and who have been motivated to act will also be convinced of the importance of contributing to groups working towards removing anti-gay laws from the books and providing protection from discrimination. Thus will a "culture of giving" be established within our community.

The gay community has a tremendous diversity of talent and wealth of resources which were mostly wasted before the AIDS crisis. It is unfortunate that it took such a tragedy to bring this talent and money out of the woodworks. But now it seems that the complacency and self-absorption of the seventies has given way to more positive ways of thinking and acting, and that we are on the cusp of a new era which will see lesbians and gay men as involved in the gay civil rights struggle as black people became involved in their own struggle in the sixties. Let us hope so.

I also hope that Yates Rist's article will cause us to reflect on our sense of proportion with regard to AIDS and to see it as one issue among many that are important to our community. I invite anyone interested in First Tuesday to call me at 549-1421 or Sandra Bailey at 532-8578 or write to First Tuesday/P.O. Box 220293/Charlotte, NC 28222.

By Rev. Lynn Guerra
Pastor, MCC Charlotte

Darrel Yates Rist's article was not only courageous but also thought provoking. A.I.D.S. is a real catastrophe with many devastating effects — not only on the homosexual community but on society as a whole.

The A.I.D.S. epidemic has served to bring our community together in the struggle against discrimination in this one issue. But, like Rist says, we have neglected or pushed into the background too many other things that we need to contend with, such as violence and discrimination against gays and lesbians as a whole and against gay and lesbian teens, especially.

One thing that I would like to add to the list of forgotten or neglected problems is that of substance abuse in our community. It has been estimated that one out of every three gay men or lesbians has a problem with substance abuse. Taking into account that abuse is a family disease, it involves, at a minimum, another one out of three who are partnered with them, who also have a problem. That means that two-thirds of our community is involved!!! Also, this substance abuse causes as many, if not more, deaths than A.I.D.S. Yet we choose to remain oblivious to the issue.

My fear is that as we continue to fight on the ONE front against A.I.D.S. and all of its ramifications we will be overcome by all of the other issues that we are neglecting.

If we are not careful, we may win the battle against A.I.D.S., but lose the war for freedom and equal rights.



Play It Safe

Nowadays, sex can be frightening. For many of us, fear of AIDS has taken the joy out of intimacy. It's just not gay to be gay anymore.

It doesn't have to be that way. Metrolina AIDS Project is now offering workshops to help gay and bisexual men learn how to reduce their risk of HIV infection without diminishing their fun.

Call MAP at 333-2437