

*Alan Wagg    October 2008*

My name is Alan Wagg and I have lived in Provincetown for several, several years. I came here in the early seventies. It's interesting because I have to think back twenty-five years plus as to what was going on with me and the community. We had just come through the seventies, which were just so wonderful, and, of course, everybody was young then, houses were affordable and the town was just terrific and spirited and a great sense of community. Then all of a sudden we started hearing about the disease that was hitting gay men and it became a big mystery. Nobody knew what it was; we're talking about the early eighties now. It kind of happened in little spurts, little bits and pieces and somewhere along the line, what I can remember is there was a meeting at the Meeting House with Alice Foley and Doctor Butterfield, there were notices for men to come and they were going to talk about this new thing that was happening. Everybody sat at the U.U. I think we were all kind of anxious to hear what they were going to say and of course there really wasn't very much that they could say because there was very little known. It was before we even had the word AIDS. What I remember is they called it GRID at that time and they were talking about people getting Pneumocystis and people getting Kaposi's sarcoma and things of that nature and dying. Of course, we hadn't had anything like that happen here yet, but I remember Don (Butterfield) saying, "A lot of people are going to get sick and a lot of people are going to die." And I don't think we wanted to believe that but he was absolutely correct in saying what he said. As time went on people did start to get sick. One afternoon I had a phone call from Preston Babbitt who lived about four doors away from me and Preston was very active in town and ran a guest house, as I ran a guest house. He called me up and he said, "Alan, we're having a meeting next Thursday afternoon at my house. We'd like you to come over. It's going

to be myself, Alice Foley and some other people in town. We need to get together because people are going to need help with what's going on." Of course, I didn't even think twice about it. I said, "Yes, I'll see you on Thursday." I went over; there were seven or eight of us sitting around Preston's living room. He still had his Christmas tree decorated and this was, I can't remember, late spring or early fall, but we did sit and we met and we decided to talk about what was going on. What ended up happening was we had meetings there every Thursday afternoon for quite a long period of time. I remember going in to the meetings, and I remember leaving, completely drained because we were talking about people who were getting sick, what had to be done and how we were going to help them out. So it became a very heavy Thursday afternoon for me and I'm sure for most people.

So this was a very difficult period for gay men in Provincetown because people were getting sick, and there was so much unknown yet, even in '84. I think everyone was frightened and, if you were a gay man, you didn't know if you were going to get sick or not, you were going to get AIDS or not. This kind of hung over everybody and I remember in '84 I went to Europe with some friends of mine on a trip and I contracted a rash and I remember flying back and I said to myself, "I'm sure I now have AIDS." Because every time something was wrong with you, a cold, a cough or anything, that was the death sentence and you definitely had AIDS. Well, I did not have AIDS, but what I recall also is when they finally came out with the test for the virus, after they had identified the virus and they had the test, that was kind of an awesome experience for everybody. Because you would go and get tested and you would have some counseling before it, and I remember that at the time that I went to be tested, they were saying that the chances are fifty/fifty, even if you're testing positive the chances are fifty/fifty that you're going

to come down with AIDS. Well that number eventually got larger and larger, went to seventy, then eighty and was eventually one hundred percent.

The time period after you had your blood work taken and when you got your results were excruciating. I remember going in and they told me that I was negative; a two thousand pound weight was lifted off me. It was like telling somebody, "You don't have cancer." today. Every gay man was going through this. The other thing that really comes to mind is the secrecy that we had to have at the very, very beginning. We couldn't let people know who had AIDS because there was so much controversy, so much bitterness, so much hatred and again not knowing. I remember Alice talking about the people who were on the Rescue Squad who were afraid of getting involved with AIDS patients because they thought they were going to get AIDS and they had to wear rubber gloves and things of this nature.

The group was donated a car so that we could drive people up to Boston to Beth Israel (Hospital), to be checked out and to get medication. We were going to have this listed in the Advocate newspaper but we decided not to do that because we didn't want people to know what the car was like and what the car was because we were keeping things very hush-hush, so that people didn't know who was sick. It's unbelievable for me to sit here and think about that today but that's how it was. It was a very scary, underground period of time which luckily changed, but at first, the lack of education, the lack of knowing, the lack of interest from the government of course. It's amazing what we eventually did in town. It was a community spirit, it was a community feeling. I'm very impressed by gay women who came out and helped and became very concerned and the entire community, straight and gay.

People started to die, they got sick and some of them died very, very quickly. We did have a wonderful minister in town at that time, who had come, and her calling to be here was right on the money because this is when AIDS started to get very explosive here though she was able to satisfy a spiritual part that we desperately needed. St Mary's was the same way, but the U.U. Meeting House became a central location. I can't tell you how many services I went to in those years for people who had passed away. It became almost routine and the first few were very devastating then eventually there were just so many that you kind of became numb to the fact.....you'd go and you'd hear pretty much the same thing and people would talk about the people. So, it became very commonplace to go to a memorial service, two, maybe three times a month for quite a long period of time. And the thing back then, everybody kind of knew each other so there was this closeness and eventually we were able to get incorporated and the Support Group (Provincetown AIDS Support Group) formed a board and they moved into a space on Bradford Street, where they had their office. I guess, within a couple of years or year and a half, the original people (those who were meeting on Thursdays) disbanded and they started the AIDS Support Group in Provincetown and it brought in a lot of volunteers. People volunteered from all over to come and help, and we would sit with people who were sick, we would sit with people who were dying, we would bring meals, take care of them as best we could. We really got into action and it just got more and more devastating. I lost many close friends, very close friends and I lost the majority of my peers in the community. I don't know if I can count on one hand the number of people that are left from that period of time for me. It was a horrible war that I went through and I ended up on the other side, amazingly alive, looking back at the devastation. It was very devastating for the people who did not have AIDS, the suffering that we went

through, the depression, the anxiety and eventually we had a group, an AIDS support group for people who were (HIV) negative. It was called the Negative Group and I think I was part of that for, oh my goodness, three, four, five years, I think. It was so amazing to go to this group and to share our feelings about our pain and our suffering and how we didn't or did have sex and all those things that (HIV) negative people would share and think about. It helped, it helped enormously, eased the depression and gave us a little bit of relief with what was going on. As I sit here twenty-five years later, I know that my life is still greatly affected, of course, by what happened and continues to be. I miss my friends, I think about them often, I think about the people in town and today I'm thinking about twenty-five years back....what it was like and how it drastically changed, it changed the country. It changed the entire gay life style, it certainly brought out the gay life style into the mainstream. I hate to say that there was something good that happened, but it did bring us out into the open and, I think, people started to accept the gay lifestyle much, much more and, I think, felt some sympathy for what was going on, but it certainly didn't start that way.

Provincetown was special because of the number of gay people, this was one of the gay spots and when we started taking care of people, the news spread. We were one of the first groups to be taking care of AIDS patients and they got wonderful care, so people started coming to Provincetown in order to live out their lives if they were sick; to get care, because of the acceptance, which they wouldn't get where they were living. If they were living in the suburbs or wherever, it was very, very hard for them to get care. Here, the community welcomed everybody, nobody was turned away and it was sad to see some of these people because the illness brought them out of the closet and a lot of families ignored them, ignored their sons and

they came here to finish off their lives. It was just an awful ending for all of these people.

You kind of tried to continue with your life as best you could and, I think, it was always there.....the fact that you were a gay man and your friends were dying or you could catch AIDS at any time. It was just always part of the consciousness and it was always part of the conversation. We were just totally aware of it and so involved in this upswing of the disease and devastation. I don't know if there were moments that people really escaped it, you couldn't really escape it, it was always there and, I think, had weighed on us to a great extent.

We didn't know, we didn't know, nobody knew what was going to happen, nobody had answers, nobody knew how devastating it was going to be, so we kind of played it by ear as things developed. I remember, we got some kind of a manual. I'm not sure where it came from and I remember going back to the office, copying reams and reams of paper so that people would have these manuals to work with. I remember one of the first instances where somebody who was very, very sick was taken to hospice in Springfield, and they were driven in a station wagon by some people in town. That was one of the first instances where we started helping people. It was really to supply the needs, whatever people needed. It covered the gamut: medical, food, clothing, rent, heat, emotional support.

We were in the middle of a war, but it started kind of gradually and just sort of developed and kind of blew up into a full blown war for quite a long time and everybody in this community was affected. It wasn't just the gay men, it wasn't just the gay women, it wasn't just the people who were helping, I think that everyone in the community was affected. Business was affected. I

remember when this first started they didn't want to mention AIDS in the newspaper because they figured that if they started talking about AIDS in Provincetown, nobody's going to come to Provincetown. There was a big fear of people not coming to Provincetown as tourists because they were afraid of AIDS and people waiting on them, serving them. There was lack of information and lack of knowledge at that time but that didn't last too long. We quickly got over that, people quickly got over that, so that didn't loom for a long period of time, but it certainly became part of our living experience here.

Town government was absolutely supportive here. I don't know what else to say about people being supportive, everybody was. I can't think of anybody who wasn't or any group that wasn't. People contributed, businesses contributed, churches contributed, everybody was involved in one way or another and I think that's the amazing thing about Provincetown. The number of people that we had here who were sick and the great numbers of people in the community who were involved in taking care of them. I don't think you saw that anywhere else.

Beyond sad, I don't think there are any words to express what I went through. It was very heavy, it was very difficult, especially when you saw close friends of yours very, very sick and dying. I remember going to a hospice in Boston, a close friend of mine was there, I remember going to New York to visit a friend of mine who was in one of the hospitals and he could barely, barely speak, he was so weak but he told me how much his life in Provincetown had meant to him and that those were some of the best years of his life. He passed away about a week later. We suffered.

At first we weren't sure how this was caught, it was a sexual transmission then, of course, they found out it was a blood to blood transmission. So, I think, "the party", partying probably came to an end...that wild partying that we had in the seventies and I don't think we'll see that again. The, boy I don't even know how to put it into words, it was from one extreme to the other. It added a whole spiritual dimension, but the spiritual dimension was, on a footing, I think, of great fear. People were afraid to get involved with people, people were, of course, afraid to have sex.....tough, tough, real tough stuff for anyone who lived during those days.

We were so caught up in what was going on that we didn't have too much time to think about the government. Alice was very outspoken about the government. Any time we had a memorial service Alice would get up and curse the government. Government was not involved at all. Reagan was in and really nothing happened, nothing happened, it was totally denied, totally ignored for many, many years and as we look back on it, I think that it's really absolutely disgusting, couldn't happen today, but it happened then. We were a minority, we weren't very well accepted in the government, as such, we were still to a great extent, fags and queers. Of course, the far right put their two-cents in. I actually spoke one day to a person who was raised in Provincetown who had joined a far right religious group, I think they have a church in Wellfleet or Eastham and I remember him telling me how he thought that this was God's wrath against gay men and that this was God's will that people were dying. I think I was stunned when I heard it. I didn't know how to respond. I was shocked, distraught, I don't know whether I ever spoke to him again or not, but it just goes to show you the ignorance that happened.



There was a terrific amount of shame during that period. I remember when “if you’re gay, then you are sick”. Hideous disease ... that was part of “the gays were causing it” ....“this was happening because of gay men” and that is how it was looked at for a long time; so we felt smaller and smaller each year I think.

I’m sure there’s a grace to it. I think it’s a grace to be alive today and I think there’s a grace that the gay community has come as far as it has come, in the world. No matter where you go there are gay people and they are out, the flags are out. That never happened before... movies, TV shows... I come from way back, when I first came out I didn’t even know the word gay and everything was totally underground. So, for me, being a man in his sixties, wow, the shift has been unbelievable.

I was out to my family and, unfortunately for me, I lost my mother in 1983 so I had a double whammy. I lost my mother, I lost friends, tough, tough, tough time....a very, very sad time.

Thank you. This has been like going for a therapy session.