

# OUT OF THE WILDERNESS

‘ONE OF AMERICA’S MOST VALUABLE TROUBLEMAKERS’ SPEAKS ABOUT AIDS AT THE HORACE DAVENPORT LECTURE IN THE MEDICAL HUMANITIES

Larry Kramer isn’t shy about his anger — toward politicians, medical bureaucracies, drug companies and even his fellow gay and lesbian community — nor is he uncomfortable with confrontation. Internationally renowned as an author, playwright and AIDS activist, Kramer urged the third annual Horace Davenport Lecture in the Medical Humanities audience out of complacency and into action on social and medical issues, particularly the surging world-wide tragedy of 60 million deaths from AIDS. Currently 95 percent of AIDS deaths occur in Third World countries.

“From day one, this was all predictable,” said Kramer, founder of New York City’s Gay Men’s Health Crisis in 1981 and the controversial group, ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), in 1987. In the early 1980s, people — primarily homosexual men — began dying of a mysterious illness known early on only as “gay cancer.” In 1983, Kramer wrote a piece for the *New York Native* entitled “1,112 and Counting.” “It scared us all,” he says, “and now we’re at 60 million. By 2020, an additional 60 million people worldwide are expected to die [from the disease].”

As he was spreading words of caution in the 1980s, much of the gay community, having gained a long-fought-for liberated lifestyle, “didn’t want to hear it, even as friends and lovers died all around them at an alarming rate,” Kramer related. Outcast by his own community for his unpopular views, it was just one of Kramer’s forays into “the wilderness,” which began with widespread negative reaction to his controversial 1978 novel, *Faggots*. Undaunted by rejection, literary and social, Kramer has been called “one of America’s most valuable troublemakers” by writer/commentator Susan Sontag.

In a conversation format October 7 at Rackham Auditorium with Howard Markel (M.D. 1986), Ph.D., who is the George E. Wantz Professor of the History of Medicine and director of the



Kramer and Markel


Center for the History of Medicine, a reflective Kramer, now 68, HIV-positive and living with a liver transplant, recalled the world’s resistance to accepting the reality of AIDS, and its deadly slowness to come to the support of those afflicted. He recalled the Tylenol scare of about the same time, in which isolated cases of tainted Tylenol caused several deaths — as well as a swift sweep of the product from store shelves and the subsequent protective packaging on Tylenol and thousands of other consumable goods. Kramer lamented the lack of a similar response to HIV and AIDS: “We had to save ourselves and each other.”

At a time when the Institute of Medicine has decried disparities in health care as “among this nation’s most serious health care problems,” Kramer’s chronicle of grass roots efforts to influence the political and medical establishments during the last 20 years, as well as to take care of one another in the midst of a fierce epidemic, was particularly sobering for his audience. As he noted, the activism of that time, however unsettling or disruptive, resulted in public attention and medical reaction that influenced research



Howard Markel, Michael Franzblau and Larry Kramer

funding, clinical drug trials, NIH and FDA policy, and national health care priorities. “It’s what you have to do,” he said, “and you make up the rules as you go along.”

Kramer’s appearance was co-sponsored by the Center for the History of Medicine, the Office of the President, the Office of the Provost, the Victor Vaughan Society, and a generous gift from Donna and Michael Franzblau (M.D. 1953). 

—RK