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LGBT 322

2 May 2024

Deep Dive 1

For my first deep dive, I was inspired by the United in Action documentary of ACT UP to dig deeper into the AIDS epidemic and the varied responses to it. I chose to read *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, specifically Chapter 51, titled “Heterosexuals.” I chose this chapter because it was focused on the societal response to the fear of heterosexual men contracting AIDS, contrasting it with the response to homosexual men and other marginalized groups. Randy Shilts enamored me with his personal style of writing on the AIDS pandemic.

The chapter opened up with the dark tones of the pandemic’s effect on New York, and then focused on the story of Silvana Strangis, a sex worker and heroin user on the streets of San Francisco. Her story was saddening, from her high school graduation “full of optimism” to her abusing drugs. Her story illustrated the harsh reality of many people like her. When you’re bouncing from fix to fix, the idea of something like AIDS, and the possibility of spreading it, is not something high on your priorities. Failing to address these types of issues in a country as rich as ours is one of the big public health failures that led to AIDS becoming as much of a problem as it did.

Strangis and her boyfriend/pimp Tony, both having AIDS, were turned into an example in the media. As Shilts writes, “She might infect a heterosexual man. That was someone who mattered; that was news.” Shilts’s tone implies that the general sentiment at the time was that gay men did not matter and did not make “good news.” Shilts proceeds to argue that the only 5

heterosexual men who had contracted AIDS could hardly be considered a pandemic, yet because it had the slightest potential to affect the majority in power, it had become major news. In fact, the craze around AIDS being spread female-to-male by IV drug users who were prostitutes had not been demonstrated to happen at any concerning rate. Cases of female prostitutes with AIDS knowingly performing sex work did not cause a huge influx of cases among heterosexual men or women.

When it comes to public opinion and interaction with the media, the reality is that the masses act irrationally. The crux of the AIDS issue was to gain public support in favor of spending, research, and distributing treatments to those that need it. By leveraging the scare that AIDS could affect the majority population, organizers and bureaucratic leaders were able to push forward that effort further.

As it related to this course, this chapter was an insightful view into public sentiment in the US at the time of the AIDS crisis. By learning about the heterosexual aspect, it displayed just one example of how implicit bias and homophobia let a normally quickly isolated virus spiral into a major public health issue. It draws parallels to the intersectional activism described in Clark A. Pomerleau's Chapter 4: US LGBTQ+ History. While previously disconnected communities of queer Americans banded together in organizations like ACT UP, it could have simply taken one heterosexual example case to rocket AIDS to the mainstream mind.

I plan to read the rest of this book over the coming days. I chose it because I became very interested in the AIDS epidemic after watching *United in Anger* and seeing the amount of activism and action ACT UP had to take to get their suffering recognized by the US government. It forms a very insightful view into the AIDS epidemic from not just an American view, but from its origins to the global suffering faced by many individuals because of the failure of our public health institutions.

Works Cited

Shilts, Randy. *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*. St. Martin's P, 1987.