



U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Mourns the Passing of LGBTQ and AIDS Activist Larry Kramer

June 5, 2020

The Commission mourns the passing of Larry Kramer, a pioneering, pre-eminent AIDS and LGBTQ activist. A renowned author, Tony-award winning playwright, and Oscar-nominated screenwriter,¹ he “made it his life’s work to change how people perceived [AIDS], those living with it, and how medical research was done in the United States and around the world.”² In doing so, he fueled civil rights revolutions.

Mr. Kramer was known, loved, reviled, and feared for his decades of fierce, articulate, unrelenting, and combative AIDS advocacy. His passion was born of anger at the U.S. government’s failure to devote sufficient funding to early AIDS research and of concern for the very lives of complacent LGBTQ people. “Kramer was often soft-spoken, almost shy, and, at least the first time you met him, was unfailingly polite. But when he spoke in public his voice became a Moses-like lightning rod, parting the waters — some would say the nation — demanding respect and dignity for the lives of a people that were being decimated by a then hidden plague, AIDS.”³ He co-founded critical AIDS health and activist groups early in the pandemic: the Gay Men’s Health Crisis in 1982 and ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) in 1987.⁴ ACT UP, at Kramer’s urging, “performed demonstrations, die-ins, political funerals and speeches against government officials, religious leaders and Wall Street to speed up AIDS research and advocate for the LGBTQ community.”⁵

Mr. Kramer’s dynamic struggles surpassed changing the paradigm of relations between activism and science. He refused to accept American anti-LGBTQ norms. Mr. Kramer called upon LGBTQ people, at a time when discrimination against his community was open and blatant, to find within the personal power to live as proud activists. His

¹ Alicia Lee, “Larry Kramer, trailblazing AIDS activist, dies at 84,” CNN, updated May 28, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/27/us/larry-kramer-aids-activist-obit-trnd/index.html>.

² Patrick Skerrett, “He was a ‘force of nature’: Anthony Fauci, Tom Frieden, and others remember Larry Kramer,” May 28, 2020, <https://www.statnews.com/2020/05/28/larry-kramer-force-of-nature-fauci-others-remember-aids-activist/>.

³ Troy Masters, “Larry Kramer dies at 84,” Washington Blade, May 27, 2020, <https://www.washingtonblade.com/2020/05/27/larry-kramer-dies-at-84/>.

⁴ Lee at note 1. See also Donald G. McNeil, Jr., “‘We Loved Each Other’” Fauci Recalls Larry Kramer, Friend and Nemesis,” The New York Times, May 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/27/health/larry-kramer-anthony-fauci.html>.

⁵ Lee at note 1.

decades of speeches, his seminal 1983 essay, “1,112 and Counting,”⁶ known as “the Larry Kramer scream heard around the world,”⁷ begging all to awaken and fight the emerging plague, and his acclaimed, semi-autobiographical 1985 play, “The Normal Heart,”⁸ full of rage and pathos, were critical catalysts for the LGBTQ civil rights campaigns that had caught fire during the 1969 Stonewall Inn Riots.

Mr. Kramer’s words and actions, his energy and his work helped to create new generations of activists who have gone on to fight for LGBTQ equality in every civil rights arena. Mr. Ken Kidd, a long-time ACT UP member and a founding member of Queer Nation, Gays Against Guns, and Rise and Resist, wrote that, “I speak for many when I say that Larry encouraged me to find my voice and scolded me for not using it whenever I could. He demanded more than once to know, ‘Where do you get off deciding your words aren’t the ones we all might need to hear? Your action might be what saves us!’ His sense of urgency was always at a level ten, which worked both for us and against us. But he changed my life, to be sure. All of our lives.”⁹

At least one of the early targets of his activism learned to appreciate his brash and acerbic public persona. Dr. Anthony Fauci, then and still Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health, was initially accused by Kramer of inaction “that resulted in the deaths of thousands . . . [and] causing today’s increase in HIV infection outside of the Queer community.”¹⁰ But over the decades, the two cultivated a close friendship. In 2002 Fauci said “[i]n American medicine, there are two eras[,] ... before Larry and after Larry.”¹¹ Upon Mr. Kramer’s death, Dr. Fauci wrote, “I have known Larry Kramer . . . for more than 30 years. We had an extraordinary, complicated but wonderful relationship that ultimately culminated in a very deep friendship, affection and I would even say love for each other. He was unique in that he totally transformed the relationship between activism and the scientific, regulatory and government community.”¹²

We honor and recognize Mr. Kramer’s contributions to the LGBTQ community, to all those impacted by AIDS, and to this nation.

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⁶ Larry Kramer, “1,112 and Counting,” New York Native, March 14-27, 1983, archival copy available at Karen Ocamb, “Larry Kramer’s Historic Essay: AIDS At 30,” The Bilerico Project, June 14, 2011, http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2011/06/larry_kramers_historic_essay_aids_at_30.php.

⁷ Karen Ocamb, “Larry Kramer’s Historic Essay: AIDS At 30,” The Bilerico Project, June 14, 2011, http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2011/06/larry_kramers_historic_essay_aids_at_30.php.

⁸ Larry Kramer, “The Normal Heart,” 1985, original script .pdf available at SCRIBD, <https://www.scribd.com/document/359325269/The-Normal-Heart-Larry-Kramer>.

⁹ Private correspondence, May 29, 2020, on file with Commissioner Michael Yaki, U.S. Comm’n on Civil Rights.

¹⁰ Larry Kramer, “An Open Letter to Dr. Anthony Fauci,” San Francisco Examiner, June 26, 1988, archival copy available at <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/aids/orgs/ACTUP/sf/1995/fauci.zap.flyer-05.06.95>.

¹¹ Michael Specter, “Public Nuisance: Larry Kramer, the man who warned America about AIDS, can’t stop fighting hard – and loudly,” The New Yorker, May 6, 2002, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/05/13/public-nuisance>.

¹² Dr. Anthony Fauci, “How Larry Kramer ‘Transformed the Relationship’ Between Activists and Government,” Time, May 29, 2020, <https://time.com/5843886/larry-kramer-fauci-remembrance/>.

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