

## Deadly disease gives birth to political activism by gays

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For decades, gay politics amounted to an occasional effort to propose an anti-discrimination ordinance. Or sometimes it was a push to overturn a sodomy law, maybe appoint an openly gay man to a civic panel. But it was nothing urgent, nothing that couldn't wait until later.

Then came AIDS, with death as the ultimate motivator.

"AIDS has changed everything. Before AIDS, there was little interest or effort politically at all," says Gary Johnson, 51, who has lived in Kansas City since 1950. He is retired from a stock brokerage firm.

"Now people are much more active. People who never would have dreamed of taking part in politics are working all the time." The disease provided a common enemy. Efforts to win more government money for AIDS research, patient care and education also accelerated the maturation of gay political organizations.

In Kansas City, many of the same people and groups who pieced together support networks for men with AIDS found they shared some common political goals.

The Human Rights Project was formed in 1989 as a political club that could lobby City Hall and work to organize the gay vote concentrated in Midtown. Jon D. Barnett, now associate editor of the *Lesbian and Gay News-Telegraph*, ran for the City Council in 1991. His candidacy pinpointed the strength and location of the gay vote in Kansas City.

"The other thing my candidacy did was make it easier for the next person," he said. "Now they can run for office and not have to put up with all the attention about them being the first openly gay candidate in the city. That next time is now. Tim Van Zandt, business manager for the Good Samaritan Project and longtime Democratic activist, is running for the Missouri House in the Midtown district seat being vacated by state Rep. Karen McCarthy. Political insiders say his sexual orientation will be as much of an asset as a handicap in the district.

"I think of myself as a Democrat running for office who happens to be gay," he said. But, he added, "the gay community should be helpful to my chances. Still, no one pretends that lesbian and gay organizations can deliver large blocs of gay voters in Kansas City like, say, Freedom Inc. turns out black voters.

The political organizations can expect a tough test in November when Missouri voters will decide the fate of a proposed constitutional amendment that would bar cities from enacting gay-rights ordinances. It would overturn measures such as the one passed in Kansas City last year.

Local gay politics still has organizational weaknesses. For instance, the Gay Pride Festival held last summer was expected to raise several thousand dollars. Instead, organizers conceded in January that they were still trying to settle debts.

Part of the problem, said Johnson, is that Kansas City's gay and lesbian groups are only now beginning to attract people who have the savvy needed to raise money and then monitor how it is spent.

"One disappointment for me (is) the wealthy gay men in the city. The reason I say that is that after the fun and games were all over and AIDS came along, they just disappeared.

"You did not see them to any great extent involved financially or politically in AIDS causes. It certainly is not difficult for them to write out a check to an AIDS organization, even if they do not wish to come publicly out of the closet. Still, lesbians and gay men say, the primary political foe is discrimination, not themselves. One Kansas City woman who works in finance said she has problems selling the cause of gay rights to her fellow African-Americans.

"With black people," she said, "especially heterosexual black people, they say: `Now wait a minute. We've been in bondage, in chains, brought over from Africa, and you're going to compare (yourself to us) because someone called you a fag?'" The gay and lesbian political activists say the strongest action anyone in their community can take is to stop hiding their homosexuality. When their numbers become clear, they say, their political influence will explode.

Linda May, now 44 and working in a federal agency, was operating her own home-repair business when she went public with her homosexuality and her politics.

"At first, my attitude was that was not relevant. And if it's not an issue, why go around yelling about it?" May said.

Then she found herself in a meeting in 1991 with Emanuel Cleaver, trying to smooth over a running argument between the mayor's

office and leaders in the gay community.

"In meeting with the mayor I was, for the first time, saying 'gay' and 'lesbian' in the same sentences with 'I' and 'we.' I said gay and lesbians 'we' and gulped.

"Then at a press conference I was identified as one of the mayor's liaisons to the gay community. There were (television) cameras there. I thought, This is out . This is really out. I had no idea how many customers I would lose. I didn't know if neighbors would march on my house. I was really scared.

"I am really pleased to report that nothing has happened. There are customers I've not heard from, but maybe they don't need any work done," she said.

"It's been second only to coming out in terms of being energizing for me. It's liberated my mind. I no longer censor myself. And it's amazing how much energy it took.

"Now I find myself being friendlier to gas station attendants and meter readers and just to people in general. It's like a little barrier that isn't there anymore. It's hard to be friendly with people through a wall. "