“I Have Lost More Than 400 Friends to This Disease”

Oral histories of folks’ HIV and COVID-19 experiences are showcased in a digital exhibit at an LGBTQ center in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

March 15, 2021 By Trent Straube

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck last year, it reminded members of the Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center in Allentown, Pennsylvania, of the early days of the AIDS epidemic. To document how both health crises have affected the local LGBTQ community, a team from the center interviewed 14 members last summer for an interactive digital exhibit of oral histories about COVID-19 and AIDS titled 40 Years of Public Health in the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community: Collecting and Curating Local Health Experiences From HIV/AIDS to COVID-19.

Visitors to the online exhibit can click through screens and listen to interviewees recount the importance of community and the devastation of the AIDS crisis—“I have lost more than 400 friends to this disease,” says public health worker David Moyer in one of the videos—as well as the advocacy that sprung up. Other participants discuss the challenges of maintaining their mental health and social structures during COVID-19 lockdowns. (Screengrabs of some participants are posted throughout this article.)

Maria Rodale talks about her brother's AIDS-related death in 1985 and her mother's activism. From "40 Years of Public Health in the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community"/Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center

The exhibit is timely. Not only did it go live on Monday, March 15, one year after the emergence of COVID-19 altered life as we knew it, but it also arrives as we mark four decades since AIDS first made headlines in June 1981.

To learn more about the exhibit, we emailed archivist Kristen Leipert. "There are parallels between the ways people are handling and fighting these two viruses [HIV, which causes AIDS, and SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19] that made the comparison an important conversation," Leipert notes. The interview is lightly edited for clarity and length.

What do you hope to accomplish with the exhibit?

We want this exhibit to show the actions and resilience of our community in a historical context—whether that's about HIV/AIDS or COVID-19. It's one thing to read about the past, but it's another to hear people talking about their own experiences in their own words. We see and hear people talk about living through the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis, and we can learn from that.

Once we get past the COVID-19 pandemic and can look back at it many years later, people can listen and learn from what living through our current moment was like. It makes history relatable and helps put people and their stories into perspective.

What themes or narratives surface as you listen to the interviews?

Over and over again, the stories touch on the importance of community and social life. While the community came together physically during the HIV/AIDS [crisis] to raise awareness and money

for those with AIDS, the COVID-19 pandemic erased social gathering. Still, people have found ways to connect with friends, family and the LGBTQ community.

Brian Jones, who works for Metropolitan Community Church, mourns the loss public gatherings during COVID-19.From “40 Years of Public Health in the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community”/Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center

The similarities are there when we think about the variety of ways we can be together while helping others—whether that is through physically being with each other or not. Watching these in a historical way, there is a gentle reminder that we struggle together, but we can persevere and come away stronger on the other side.

This exhibit weaves together experiences from two public health crises that have shaped the past 40 years for the LGBTQ community. These stories illustrate resilience, activism and the sense of community through challenging times, and our history reminds us that we can overcome obstacles together, even while apart.

Are there health challenges unique to your area of Pennsylvania?

Locally, we were fortunate to have an early LGBTQ community center during the 1980s, offering a support system at the start of the HIV/AIDS crisis. [The Lehigh Valley Lesbian and Gay Community Center evolved into the AIDS Services Center.] Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center was founded in 2014 and opened its doors in 2016. Our center has been a reliable resource for supportive services and virtual community spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The challenges shared in this exhibit are often shared by those in larger cities, but this exhibit highlights the fact that in smaller cities [and] suburban and rural areas, our LGBTQ communities were—and are—as strong and active in overcoming the challenges they face.

Lizabeth Kleintop discusses using social media to build community.From “40 Years of Public Health in the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community”/Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center

Does the exhibit address other health challenges?

Mental health is discussed in both the HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 oral histories. It is presented in the exhibit with some of the COVID-19 clips, whether the worry is with the narrator’s own mental health or concern for the LGBTQ community as a whole.

How did you select the interviewees?

We interviewed 14 people, who were selected from a group of people who live or have lived in the Lehigh Valley, which is in eastern Pennsylvania.

Miles Molerio shares concerns about mental health issues during COVID-19 isolation.From “40 Years of Public Health in the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community”/Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center

Finally, what’s the exhibit’s backstory?

The Lehigh Valley LGBT Community Archive is a program of Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center in partnership with Trexler Library at Muhlenberg College. We’ve been collecting both physical materials and oral histories documenting our local LGBTQ community. As an addition to the growing oral history collections, the center was interested in the narratives from our area concerning the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The exhibit is sponsored in part by the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium, with generous support provided by a grant to Lafayette College from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Interviews took place between June and July 2020, with additional written stories collected as well. A digital exhibit showcasing materials from this collection was part of the grant, and planning for the exhibit started in the fall of 2020.

For a collection of articles about art and HIV, including this month’s web gallery by Visual AIDS and a profile on Shirlene Cooper, who uses art to empower women living with HIV, click #Art. For more information about HIV, see the POZ Basics on HIV/AIDS. And for need-to-know facts about COVID-19, visit COVID-19 Health Basics on COVIDHealth.com.

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