

# AIDS NETWORK of EDMONTON

Original Location 10233 98 Street NW  
Current Location 9702 111 Avenue NW



[www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca](http://www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca)



The HIV/AIDS pandemic is often described as one of the most significant and impactful events in all of queer history. There is no doubt that it spurred Edmonton's LGBTQ2 community into action during a time of great uncertainty, intense emotion, and unparalleled grief and loss. However, there was also incredible resilience, which motivated a strong and enduring sense of community and togetherness. As one poignant example, many lesbian and bisexual women were on the frontlines of providing care to the men who were dying and often had no family support to rely upon. This was a remarkable time when the community came together to fight for its survival.

During the early 1980s, there was a considerable degree of hysteria around AIDS, and a lot of it was perpetuated by the media. Dr. Henri Toupin, who was a prominent neurologist and the owner of the Pisces Health Spa, was accused in the press of having AIDS, causing public hysteria and a moral panic among his patients.<sup>1</sup> The Edmonton Sun was later sued for two million dollars<sup>2</sup> and forced to issue a public apology and retraction. In other cases, the government failed to acknowledge and respond appropriately to the epidemic because it was thought to be "killing the right people." While other cities with significant queer populations hosted "die-ins" and stormed health research facilities, Edmontonians responded to AIDS by forming small, community-oriented volunteer groups to support those living with the disease and raise awareness about the epidemic. This sense of community and togetherness was vital as AIDS was used to justify homophobia worldwide. In Edmonton, rumour has it that people were seen wearing t-shirts that read "AIDS Kills Fags Dead". Those involved in combatting the AIDS epidemic were acutely aware of how the pandemic was being used to justify violence against the community and sought to hold space for those who were being stigmatized.

The historian Valerie Korinek argues that in the mid-1980s, when AIDS arrived in Edmonton, "there was an explosion of organizational development, activism, and attention paid to gay men (in particular), which stimulated health activism."<sup>3</sup> In fact, by 1985, "AIDS had arrived in all the prairie cities" and



"dramatically transformed the organizational, activist, and queer communities" as "attention turned from liberationist goals to medical advocacy and support."<sup>4</sup> Several organizations emerged in Edmonton, including the AIDS Network of Edmonton, which was established in 1984 and later renamed HIV Edmonton in 1999.<sup>5</sup> In 1987, Kairos House was established by Catholic Social Services to provide accommodations and supports for individuals living with HIV/AIDS.<sup>6</sup> Both HIV Edmonton and Kairos House still operate and provide essential services to this day.

The first known AIDS patient in Edmonton was Ross Armstrong. Diagnosed in 1984, he died on July 1, 1986.<sup>7</sup> Ross was known as a handsome and athletic competitive swimmer involved in Edmonton's early LGBTQ2 sporting groups. He participated in the first-ever Gay Olympic Games in 1982.<sup>8</sup> When news of Armstrong's diagnosis reached educator Michael Phair, he joined forces with local volunteers to form an organization that could help those living with HIV/

1 David Quigley, "Doctor Suspected of Having AIDS," Edmonton Sun, May 9, 1985, 2.

2 "Doctor Sues Newspaper for \$2 Million," Edmonton Journal, June 28, 1985, B3.

3 Valerie Korinek, *Prairie Fairies: A History of Queer Communities and Peoples in Western Canada, 1930-1985* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 389.

4 Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 26.

5 "Queer History in Edmonton: The Founding of the AIDS Network," produced by Edmonton Public Library, July 16, 2020, YouTube video, 6:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-kvH4QBCAA>.

6 "HIV/ AIDS Support," Catholic Social Services, <https://www.cssalberta.ca/Our-Services/HIV-AIDS-Support>.

7 "Queer History in Edmonton."

8 "Faces of Edmonton," <https://facesofedmonton.com/post/151797732809/in-1982-ross-armstrong-a-man-described-by-his>.

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AIDS in Edmonton. The first meeting took place around Michael's kitchen table. Michael's home would serve as the organization's first headquarters until office space could be found. The name "AIDS Network of Edmonton" was decided because co-founders—including Liz Massiah and Walter Cavaliere—wanted to emphasize the organization's collaborative mandate and the fact that radical change would only be possible with multiple sectors of society on board, including both the school and health care systems. With several different backgrounds represented and "with work coming in different provincial departments," the co-founders of the AIDS Network didn't have an overarching plan for dealing with AIDS, but they "all knew how to navigate the provincial system and press for policy change."<sup>9</sup> They also knew that it was essential to include the lived experience of People With AIDS (PWAs) in the organization and decision-making processes. People like Armstrong played a significant role in raising awareness about AIDS in Edmonton. Armstrong quickly emerged "as the public face of AIDS in Edmonton,"<sup>10</sup> which came with an inordinately high cost. In an April 1986 article in the Edmonton Journal, Armstrong was referred to as the "City AIDS victim."<sup>11</sup> The obstacles Armstrong faced during his two-year battle with AIDS—and the bravery he demonstrated in the early years of the epidemic—eventually led HIV Edmonton to name "the hub" of their agency after him—the place where peer support and treatment information is available and where coffee and breakfast are regularly served.<sup>12</sup> The Ross Armstrong Centre continues to function as a critical resource for HIV-positive people and their allies.

One of the first tasks volunteers of the AIDS Network of Edmonton dealt with was the humanization of the virus and the people affected by it. The newness of, and uncertainty around, the virus had generated so much fear and stigma



that people first diagnosed often found themselves without any support. Many faced extreme discrimination, and some were cast out and rejected by their own families. AIDS Network volunteers found themselves called upon more and more to assist with day-to-day tasks like helping with groceries, and planning memorials and funerals. This was emotionally draining work for all involved, but many lives were positively impacted by this vital work. By sharing the stories and voices of people living with AIDS, media stereotypes were challenged by very real and local experiences. People with AIDS were not

simply statistics; they were vibrant and dynamic community members, many of whom were dying in the prime of their lives.

Barry, a gay man from a small northern Alberta community, recalled the way AIDS service networks, in their early days, had to develop new methods of grieving<sup>13</sup>. Processes that would work in other circumstances—such as gathering together to share stories or having individual funerals—didn't work when people were dying as fast as they were. This forced organizations to grieve in semi-annual events where multiple losses were mourned together. Barry also recalled how so often, a time like Christmas would see an excessive number of deaths, making those losses loom heavier because of the festive nature of the season. Involvement in the field often made for a stark and defining moment in people's lives; there was the time before AIDS and the time after. The time after was one of urgency and immediacy; there was no certainty there would be a future.

David recalls the double whammy caused by the homophobia of people's friends and families and the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. This meant many—too many—people ended up dying alone. It fell upon friends, and volunteer groups such as the AIDS Network of Edmonton, to make sure this didn't happen. David also powerfully recalls the cumulative impact of so many deaths, and not just the number, but also the variation. Some were slow in coming, with time to try to prepare, but others were fast and unexpected, especially from those who had chosen to end their own life rather than wait for the virus to end it. This impact was something that people outside the community couldn't always understand, which contributed to feelings of despair and isolation for the volunteers and caregivers who could only find genuine empathy among each other.

Allison, a gay woman, found herself facing homophobia from medical professionals and colleagues when dealing with HIV+ patients. She recalls patients berating her with questions, wanting to know why she was there and what she wanted. She remembers the parents of one man swooping in and removing their son from the hospital's care, ignoring the wishes of his partner. Her experiences were raw and unjust—and were repeated time after time after time. Like many volunteers, Allison found herself self-medicating with alcohol and needing to seek counselling for herself to deal with the mess of emotions this work dredged up.

Dennis, diagnosed in the early 1990s, recalls how the political landscape of the province affected him. This was the time of the Delwin Vriend court trials, which seemed to underscore how little value the provincial government ascribed to LGBTQ2 people. At the same time, there was doubt surrounding whether the Alberta government would even cover the costs of new HIV antiretrovirals. Dennis recalls there only being coverage at all because of an unexpected surplus in budgetary funds.

Securing financial support and a suitable workspace would prove difficult for the AIDS Network of Edmonton, as the provincial and federal governments did not actively address the concerns of PWAs or LGBTQ2 people more broadly in the 1980s, and funding for such endeavours proved challenging to acquire. In 1984, The Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose (ISCWR)

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9 Jamie Sarkonak, "Edmonton's Forgotten Epidemic," *The Gateway*, March 16, 2016, <https://thegatewayonline.ca/2016/03/feature-edmontons-forgotten-epidemic/>.

10 "Faces of Edmonton."

11 Lasha Morningstar, "City AIDS Victim [...]," *Edmonton Journal*, April 18, 1996.

12 HIV Network of Edmonton Society, <https://www.hivedmonton.com/get-help/ross-armstrong-centre>

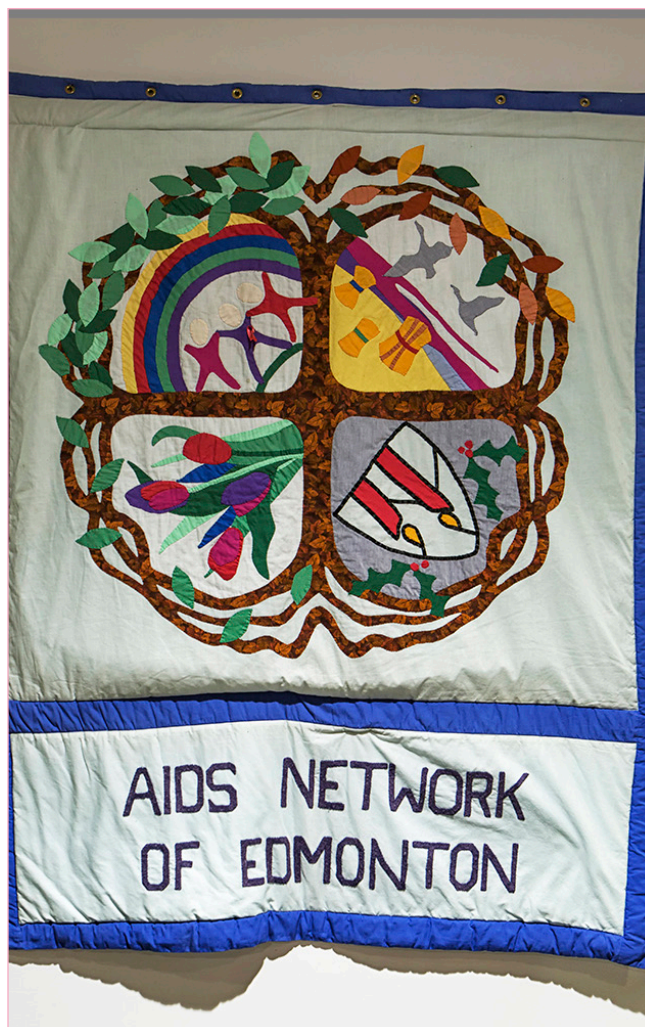
13 The stories of Barry, David, Allison, and Dennis are drawn from Valerie Gervais, "AIDS Grief and Multiple Loss: The Experiences of Individuals Within an AIDS Service Organization" (Master's Thesis, University of Regina, 1985).

raised eight hundred dollars with a vibrant drag show and would go on to raise additional funds for Kairos House well into the 2000s.<sup>14</sup> That same year, the AIDS Network performed Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" as a community fundraiser in Victoria Park. Phair dressed as the Queen of Hearts, while Armstrong went as Alice in "tough drag." A cucumber sandwich lunch accompanied the day-long performance, and the AIDS Network made close to five hundred dollars. In February 1985, after Phair had turned to the media seeking help in finding a suitable office space, the City of Edmonton offered to rent space in a two-story brick building near the Winspear Centre.

The existence of the AIDS Network of Edmonton, which promoted education and community volunteerism, also served as a dynamic catalyst for making other important changes possible, including in the arts community, in health, and beyond. Examples included the announcement of \$6.5 million in funding by Minister Jim Dinning to help Albertans combat and prevent HIV,<sup>15</sup> which included \$130,000 to support the AIDS Network of Edmonton. In 1988, Minister Dinning was honoured with the AIDS Network's first Community Leadership Award.<sup>16</sup>

The artistic community in Edmonton was also impacted by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which would forever change the city's cultural landscape. In 1988, Visual AIDS, an artist group based in New York City, started "Day Without Art: An International Day of Action" and "Mourning in Response to the AIDS Crisis". These movements quickly spread internationally, including to Edmonton. The Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt came to Edmonton in 1990. Edmonton-based Brad Fraser's play "Unidentified Human Remains," which debuted in 1989, was the first to include an HIV-positive character. Between 1986 and 1995, several plays, performances, and drag shows were held all over the city to raise money for the AIDS Network of Edmonton. Benefits were held at the Bonnie Doon Community Hall and local gay bars like Flashback, The Roost, and Boots n' Saddle. At some of these events, Phair recalls cheekily handing out condoms to patrons of the city's gay bars, often with the quip: "Oh, this won't be big enough for you."<sup>17</sup>

Like most LGBTQ2 community collectives in Edmonton, the AIDS Network was a small but mighty force. The group took on a great deal of critical work and punched well above its weight—pressuring the government on its inertia while turning the party at local clubs. They were a source of hope and light while doing a lot more behind the scenes than many people knew.



14 Jason Clevett, "23rd Annual AIDS Benefit: Roost Fundraises for AIDS Research," *Gay Calgary.com* Magazine, November 2006, <http://www.gaycalgary.com/Magazine.aspx?id=37&article=140>.

15 Heritage Savings Trust Fund Act, 1988, [https://docs.assembly.ab.ca/LADDAR\\_files/docs/committees/hs/legislature\\_21/session\\_2/19880107\\_1400\\_01\\_hs.pdf](https://docs.assembly.ab.ca/LADDAR_files/docs/committees/hs/legislature_21/session_2/19880107_1400_01_hs.pdf).

16 "Awards," HIV Edmonton, <https://hivedmonton.com/about/awards/>.

17 Jamie Sarkonak, "Edmonton's Forgotten Epidemic."

#### FURTHER RESOURCES

Learn more about HIV Edmonton by visiting their website  
<https://hivedmonton.com>