

NEWS

- National
- Local
- Mind, Body & Soul
- Sports
- Archives

OPINION

- Editorials
- Letters
- Columnists
- Message Boards

A&E

- The Gay Agenda
- Calendar
- Movies
- Food & Wine

LIVING

- Gay Bar Guide
- Dining Guide
- Classifieds
- Obituaries

Salt Lake METRO

- Subscribe
- Advertise
- Contact Us
- Store

SEARCH NEWS

current issue

all news

powered by

FreeFind

Links

This site is owned and operated by Michael Aaron Green

# Feature



## Gay Men's Health Issue:



You might be closer than you think!  
WATCH HOW!  
(allow 27 min. to view)

ROYAL COURT PRESENTS  
FABULOUS FUN BUS  
TO WENDOVER  
SUNDAY MARCH 12  
CLICK HERE

### The Creation of a Gay Men's Health Movement

*This is an excerpt from an article in the current issue of "White Crane, Our Bodies, Ourselves" entitled "Gay Bodies, Gay Selves: Understanding the Gay Men's Health Movement" and is available on line at [whitecranejournal.com](http://whitecranejournal.com).*

by Eric Rofes

In 1998, when the annual National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference, which drew together people working on LGBT health issues nationwide, ceased to exist—its host organization went bankrupt—discussions took place about finding a new organization to host the event. At the time, lesbian activists wanted to organize on their own for a few years and several key leaders encouraged gay men to begin "to get their act together beyond HIV/AIDS." This motivated me to work with a small group of other activists—all under the age of 30—sharing similar values and visions, to issue a call to the first national gay men's health summit.

Coming as much out of frustration with HIV prevention work as from the current sex panic sweeping over gay communities nationwide, our team of good-hearted organizers volunteered to do what needed to be done to create a space where people concerned about the health and wellness of gay male communities could come together and explore the issues outside of the paradigm of disease and self-destructiveness that had overtaken other venues. After eight years of intensive gay men's health organizing efforts occurring outside the purview of any national gay organization, we have finally succeeded in creating an alternative to the disease model of working on gay men's health issues, an alternative that, while far from dominant, is being embraced by more and more organizers and more and more rank and file gay men who sense that there is something very wrong with how journalists and medical experts continue to talk about gay men's communities.

The model we put forward at the first three gay men's health summits (2000, 2001, 2003) included at least three beliefs that contrast dramatically with the beliefs of the disease model. First, we believe that gay men, at root, (i.e. radically) are individually and collectively healthy, reasonable, life-affirming, and successful in creating fulfilling and meaningful lives. Second, we take an asset-based approach to gay men's communities rather than a deficit-based approach; we look at and build on inherent

community strengths, resources, skills, and values that demonstrate gay men's commitment to survive and thrive even under formidable circumstances. Third, we share in a commitment to approaching gay men as savvy, reasonable people with a baseline commitment to self-care, community-care, and disease prevention. Ultimately, we believe that gay men who appear unreasonable and destructive to themselves and others do exist, but we believe the current paradigms misrepresent all gay men for this small group. At the same time, we refuse to separate ourselves and our movement from these men and create programs only for "goodies" and avoid the "baddies," or write them off as inhuman or inhumane.

We organized our small group of national summits with the intent of dispersing these ideas and values widely throughout the nation in a manner that was decentralized, unstructured, ultimately beyond our control. Inspired by Alberto Melucci's work on contemporary social movements and Michel Maffesoli's work on neo-tribalism, we believed that, in today's world, paradigm shifts can result from new, creative organizing techniques. We rolled up our sleeves, got down to work, and now, several years later, see a changing landscape to which we have contributed.

I know I share the joy and satisfaction of many organizers who've marveled at the growing influence our nascent gay men's health movement has had and the many projects and events that seem at least partially inspired by our work. Communities have held over 30 local and regional gay men's health summits throughout the nation, including not only events in urban centers such as New York, San Francisco, and Seattle, but summits in Wilmington, Delaware; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Hartford, Connecticut. Summits have been held focused on African-American and Latino gay men, rural Southern men and young gay men.

In the United States, the origins of the term "gay men's health" are rooted in the gay liberation movement and at least one organization utilizing the term in its title remains from that period (Berkeley's Gay Men's Health Collective). However, during the 1980s, after New Yorkers named their first AIDS organization "Gay Men's Health Crisis," the term seems to have become a euphemism for AIDS. As activist Chris Bartlett has pointed out, HIV so overwhelmed the community that "gay men's health" became synonymous with "HIV/AIDS."

We find ourselves at an unusual moment now, where the term "gay men's health" has acquired a certain cachet and is being increasingly taken up by a diverse range of projects and used in several different ways. Not all of these projects attempt to tackle the range of health challenges facing gay men. Few of the projects attempt to shift to a wellness model and away from the disease model of gay men's cultures and communities. Also surprising to many of us is the way the term has been embraced in other countries, especially Canada, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand, and, recently, France; we have been surprised by the large numbers of international participants at the first three national gay men's health summits.

When we began agitating for a national "gay men's health" summit in 1998, we seized on the term in an attempt to strategically move its meaning beyond HIV/AIDS. Our intent was twofold: (1) we hoped to promote a holistic view of health that incorporated not only medical and mental health, but emotional, political, spiritual, and community health concepts as well; (2) when we did focus on health threats to gay men, we wanted HIV/AIDS simply to be included as one of the many ailments facing gay men, alongside cancer, heart disease, street and domestic violence, syphilis, obesity, and addiction.

*Eric Rofes was the convener of the first three national Gay Men's Health Summits and serves on the Advisory Board for White Crane Institute. He is a long-time activist and community organizer and has published over a dozen books, most recently *A Radical Rethinking of Sexuality and Schooling: Status Quo or Status Queer* (Rowman & Littlefield). He is a professor of education at Humboldt State University and is completing a book on organizing a gay men's health movement and working on a play about men who test positive today. He is based in San Francisco and can be reached at [erofes@aol.com](mailto:erofes@aol.com).*

---

*Survivor: Guatemala is shown locally on KUTV, Channel 2 at 7pm Thursdays.*