

# **SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC**

**A documentary by Jean Carlomusto**

**70 Minutes**

Video, Color, USA, 2010



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# SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC

Fascinating, informative doc...



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FRAMELINE  
San Francisco LGBT  
Film Festival

WORLD PREMIERE  
NEWFEST  
NYC LGBT Film Festival

Jacob Burns Film Center

# SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC

## Short Synopsis

“Sex in an Epidemic’ explores the social and cultural history of HIV/AIDS in the US and its impact on the gay community, linking the emergence of the disease in the early 1980s to contemporary sex education approaches. Including interview footage from frontline gay activists and news reports from the early 80s through the late 2000s, this is a powerful and urgent look into the political controversies surrounding AIDS education. An early narrator explains that he wants people now to know what it was like then – the film succeeds admirably in that regard, reminding us both of the panic surrounding AIDS in its early days as well as our nation’s ongoing ambivalence about sex education”

## Long Synopsis

**SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC** is a pioneering documentary that explores the personal, political and structural challenges that have continually hampered the best efforts of HIV educators and community groups to curb HIV infection rates in the United States. It is a compelling history of the devastating early days of the epidemic in NYC, when men with “GRID” were a stigmatized population that died swiftly of a terrifying new disease.

Few concepts have had as great an impact on sexuality over the past 28 years as that of “safer sex.” Yet, as a concept, it is important to remember two things: first, safer sex had to be invented amidst an alarming lack of information that existed before the discovery of HIV in 1984; and second, safer sex as a concept had to be sold by the persistent and creative persuasion of community-based groups all across the country.

**SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC** unfolds in four chronological segments.

### Rare Cancer - NYC 1981

It was impossible to say with medical certainty what was causing a “rare cancer” in gay men and how to prevent it. Publishing factually accurate sex recommendations was extraordinarily difficult in the atmosphere of fear and blame that pervaded the gay community. Yet, Dr Joseph Sonnabend and his patients, Michael Callen and Richard Berkowitz, write *HOW TO HAVE SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC*, the first book on safe sex.

### To Promote and Encourage

In late 1984, HIV is identified as the cause of AIDS and a reliable test for the virus is developed. The first medical guidelines for the prevention of HIV transmission are written. Community based groups take these medical recommendations and develop a vernacular to market safer sex to their constituents. GMHC creates playful safer sex workshops and erotic videos such as *Chance of a Lifetime* to reach the community. Energized by the political message of Act Up, 800,000 lesbians and gay men march on Washington for equal rights on October 29, 1987. Two days later, Senator Jessie Helms attacks GMHC’s *Safer Sex Comix* on the Senate floor. His rant leads to the *Helms Amendment* prohibiting federal funding for any educational material that condones sodomy or the “homosexual life-style.” This amendment hampers efforts to educate gay and bisexual men at a critical juncture in the epidemic.

### Preaching Abstinence

Funding for abstinence-based sex education started under the Reagan administration, but progressed rapidly under George W. Bush. Against the recommendation of his own Surgeon General and despite scientific evidence from the CDC citing the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only education, Bush repeatedly increased funding for these programs. This section explores the efforts by Americans from all walks of life to challenge government funding and promotion of abstinence-until-marriage based sex education.

**Prevention Justice** Approximately 60,000 Americans are newly diagnosed each year. Despite growing numbers of infection, particularly among African Americans, Latinos, and gay men, funding for evidenced based interventions has effectively decreased. In the face of government inaction, groups like Act Up Philadelphia and CHAMP have used AIDS activism to advocate for effective HIV-prevention programs that look at the structural inequalities driving up HIV infection rates in populations most affected.

Each segment speaks openly and honestly, with courage and hope, about the challenges of HIV prevention.

**SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC** is a wakeup call for renewed engagement around prevention.



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# SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

### **PRODUCER/DIRECTOR/EDITOR**

Jean Carlomusto

### **ASSOCIATE PRODUCER**

Shanti Avirgan

### **MUSIC COMPOSER**

Sam Sutton

### **INTERVIEWS**

Jean Carlomusto

### **DISTRIBUTION**

Outcast Films

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### **FISCAL SPONSOR**

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### **FUNDING:**

Bruce Brothers

Gill Foundation

Long Island University Research Grant;

Christine Myogestu Swann

Alexis Danzig, In Memory of Allan Danzig

### **ARCHIVAL MATERIALS**

Act Up New York

Act Up Philadelphia

Richard Berkowitz

DIVA Collective

Gay Men's Health Crisis

Family of George Harris III, aka Hibiscus

Gregory Pickup

LGBT Community Center, NYC

LOVE Collective

Lesbian Herstory Archives

New York Public Library

POZ Magazine

SEICUS

Testing the Limits Collective

UN Visual Material Library

## **SPECIAL THANKS**

Shanti Avirgan  
George Bellinger Jr  
Richard Berkowitz  
Robert Bank  
CHAMP [www.champnetwork.org](http://www.champnetwork.org)  
Maxwell Chiardullo  
Lei Chou  
Julie Davids  
Anne-Christine d'Adesky  
Kenyon Farrow  
Tracey Fitz  
Gay Men's Health Crisis  
Cynthia Gomez  
Lesbian Herstory Archives  
Bart Herbison  
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# SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC

## SELECTED INTERVIEW/CAST LIST

### **Michael Shernoff**

Micheal Shernoff was an early volunteer for Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and became one of the first social workers in the United States to address AIDS in a private psychotherapy practice. He wrote many articles and offered training for both mental health professionals and patients on dealing with mental health aspects of gay sexuality and living with HIV and AIDS. In 1985 he and Luis Palacios-Jiménez created the workshop Hot, Horny and Healthy: Eroticizing Gay Sex for a GMHC conference. The workshop, intended to teach gay men how to continue to engage in sexual activity without risking HIV transmission, was eventually presented in cities across North America. After a partner died from AIDS, Shernoff produced an anthology entitled *Gay Widowers: Life after the Death of a Partner* that ten years later was described as still being the only book to address the specific challenges of grief for gay men who have lost their partners.

### **Kenyon Farrow**

Kenyon Farrow has been working as an organizer, communications strategist, and writer on issues at the intersection of HIV/AIDS, prisons, and homophobia. As a Policy Institute Fellow with the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), Kenyon is working on a report about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Black gay men in the U.S. Kenyon also served as press coordinator with a US delegation of advocates at the 2008 International AIDS Conference coordinated by Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP) to advocate for a National AIDS Strategy with other advocates from the US, which resulted in international press on the issue. Farrow is also a founding board member with FIERCE!, served as Board Co-chair for Queers for Economic Justice, on the National Organizing Body for Critical Resistance, and was CR's first Southern Region Coordinator based in New Orleans.

### **Cynthia Gomez**

Cynthia A. Gomez, Ph.D., the founding director of San Francisco State University's Health Equity Initiatives, leads efforts to enhance and integrate campus research, curricula, community service and training programs that address health disparities and/or promote health equity in the United States. A leading scientist in HIV prevention, she previously served as co director of the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies (CAPS) at University of California, San Francisco, where she was also an associate professor in the Department of Medicine. Prior to her work with CAPS, Dr. Gomez spent 12 years working in community health settings, including five years as director of a child and family mental health center in Boston. Dr. Gomez is a pioneer in research on cultural determinants of sexual behaviors, gender dynamics, and programs for people living with HIV. She has served on several national committees, including the Center for Disease Control's HIV and STD Advisory Council, and is a member of the board of trustees of the National AIDS Fund and the Guttmacher Institute. She was an appointed member of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS under both the William J. Clinton and George W. Bush administrations.

### **Maxine Wolfe**

Maxine Wolfe, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus of Environmental Psychology at The City University of New York Graduate School, where she specialized in Women and AIDS, women and the environment, and lesbian and gay issues. Wolfe was a Coordinator of Direct Action for ACT-UP, and a cofounder of its Women's Caucus and the ACT-UP National Women's Committee. She was also a co-founder of the Lesbian Avengers, a member of Queer Nation, a coordinator of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and is a long time political activist.

**Anne-Christine d'Adesky**

Anne-christine d'Adesky is a journalist, author, filmmaker and community AIDS activist. She is the founder and Co-Executive Director of WE-ACTx (Women's Equity in Access to Care and Treatment) that provides HIV treatment to Rwandan genocide rape survivors. She is also the Executive Director of AIDS, Medicine & Miracles, and a San Francisco-based national AIDS organization that offers holistic HIV educational programs.

As a journalist, Ms. d'Adesky has covered HIV treatment and research issues since 1984. She is the former Editor and founder of HIV Plus, a leading US journal on HIV research and treatment and freelances for the IAVI Report, amfAR Treatment Insider, and POZ magazine among other publications. As part of the 2000, XIII International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa, Ms. d'Adesky was the US co-organizer of weeklong satellite conference for HIV-positive women from the local townships of Durban. In 2001, she co-organized a satellite conference on access to HIV treatment for women in Kampala, Uganda. This meeting resulted in the creation of an East African "Women's Treatment Access Campaign"(WTAC), a new global grassroots initiative designed to promote women and girl's access to HIV care and treatment and to advocate for policy changes. She also organized a community meeting in New York during the UN Special Session on AIDS to discuss potential PWA/NGO access to generic medicines.

**Julie Davids**

Julie Davids is Co-Director at the Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP), after serving as the group's founding Executive Director and Senior Consultant. Davids has worked on campaigns for needle exchange, health care access, research issues, and the rights of people of all genders, and served as a community advocate in the AIDS Clinical Trials Group (ACTG). Davids helped to start Project TEACH (Treatment Education Activists Combating HIV), which provides activist and leadership training for people living with HIV at Philadelphia FIGHT and was the first community organizer for Health GAP, an activist group dedicated to eliminating barriers to access to HIV/AIDS treatment around the world. After a year-long Charles H. Revson fellowship at Columbia University, David's founded CHAMP in 2003 where she developed an analysis of the history and future of HIV/AIDS as a social struggle tied to economic, racial and human rights.

David's is the past co-chair of the Federal AIDS Policy Partnership (FAPP) and is on the steering committees of the Caucus for Evidence-Based Prevention and the International Rectal Microbicides Advocates. Currently, David's is the board co-chair for the Providence Youth and Student Movement (PrYSM), non-profit Southeast Asian youth-led organization whose vision is end all forms of violence, whether they come from the self, the community, or from institutions and systems.

**Waheedah Shabazz El**

Waheedah Shabazz-El is a Community Organizer and Trainer with the Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP). Waheedah, a retired Postal Worker, was diagnosed with AIDS in 2003 and since her diagnosis, has become a fervent member of the social justice movement and an AIDS activist, advocate, educator and community organizer. Waheedah is a graduate of Project TEACH Outside and Project TEACH, educational advocacy programs at Philadelphia FIGHT and is currently employed by Philadelphia FIGHT as an HIV counselor and tester and volunteers as a peer educator. She is an organizer for the Philadelphia County Coalition for Prison Health-Care, an editor of Prison Health newsletter, and a member of the PRHCN (Prison Re-Entry Health-Care Network). In addition, she is the Community Constituency Representative for the INSIGHT Clinical Trials Network at Temple University Hospital and serves as Vice Chair of the Penn Center for AIDS Research Community Advisory Board.

**ADDITIONAL INTERVIEWS:** George Bellinger JR; Cynthia Gomez; Kristen Leathers; Magali Romero; Dionne Toussaint; A. Toni Young; Jose DeMarco

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## Filmmaker Biography

Jean Carlomusto's films are unorthodox investigative reports on subjects that have been all but erased from history. Her documentaries have been exhibited internationally in festivals, museums and on television. In **L IS FOR THE WAY YOU LOOK**, she pieced together lesbian history using whatever scraps of gossip and memory she could find. In **TO CATCH A GLIMPSE**, she delved into her family history by trying to find out if the rumors about her grandmother's death -- from a botched abortion in 1939 -- were true. Her celebrated work, **SHATZI IS DYING**, is a multilayered treatise exploring queer culture, AIDS politics, life and death, traced through the near-death experiences of a beloved rescue dog.



In 1987, Carlomusto began making videos for Gay Men's Health Crisis after a stint as the projectionist for their *Safer Sex Workshops*. Her GMHC co-productions have helped to bring about positive change in the face of the epidemic, and include **DOCTORS, LIARS AND WOMEN, AIDS ACTIVISTS SAY NO TO COSMO, SEIZE CONTROL OF THE FDA** and **SAFER SEX SHORTS**. Her current documentary, **SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC**, is the outgrowth of over 20-years of making videos about the HIV/AIDS movement. She was a member of the **Testing the Limits AIDS Video Collective** and the **Act Up NY** affinity group, **DIVA TV**. Her interactive video altar, **OFFERINGS**, which commemorates AIDS activists, has been featured at the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles, The Museum of the City of New York, and has toured South Africa as part of the **Make Art/Stop AIDS** project.

Carlomusto is a professor of Media Arts at Long Island University.



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**Posted: Tue., Jun. 29, 2010, 4:15pm PT**  
**By RONNIE SCHEIB**

An Outcast Films release of a Sunyata Films production. Produced, directed, edited by Jean Carlomusto. With: Michael Shernoff, Richard Berkowitz, Larry Kramer, Lawrence Mass, Rodger McFarlane, Cynthia Gomez, Maxine Wolfe, George Bellinger, Kenyon Farrow, Waheedah Shabazz El.

A cogent docu with a solid throughline, "Sex in an Epidemic" traces the impact of AIDS on the gay community -- from the terror, confusion and rampant misinformation at the outset to later struggles to sustain viable gay lifestyles and reclaim hard-won civil liberties. Activists recall times that have faded from public awareness, exploding myths and false assumptions along the way. Thus, pic's in-depth history of "safe sex" includes the now-surprising fact that the concept needed to be invented from scratch (nobody knew what defined "safe"). Fascinating, informative film will be warmly welcomed by gay fests and educational venues worldwide.

Told largely by founders of various grassroots organizations that sprang up to cope with the AIDS outbreak, pic vividly evokes the collective shock caused by the so-called "mysterious cancer" decimating queer society just after gay political consciousness had triumphantly emerged from the closet. Indeed, many felt the disease was part of a conspiracy to demonize homosexuality: One interviewee remembers French philosopher Michel Foucault dismissing the new gay-targeted plague as a product of American puritanical thinking. Two months later, Foucault was dead.

Helmer Jean Carlomusto, a longtime AIDS activist, began documenting events early on, her footage spanning two decades. Pic mostly proceeds chronologically, focusing on problems gay leaders faced as they sought to cull and disseminate information in an atmosphere of rising conservatism and outright homophobia. At first, ignorance reigned as to how the malady spread. Against this backdrop of uncertainty, gay leadership split into two distinct camps -- one eager to sound alarm bells and the other reluctant to overly proscribe behavior. The former camp is personified, in extensive interviews, by Richard Berkowitz (protagonist of Daryl Wein's documentary "Sex Positive"), who co-authored "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic," the first attempt to tamp down homosexual practices in light of the scourge. Repping the other side is Dr. Larry Maas, who resisted feeding society's paranoia by refusing to ban promiscuity without proper scientific data.

Covering Reagan's election, the ascendancy of Christian fundamentalism and the belief that AIDS was God's punishment for unnatural acts, Carlomusto excerpts televised pearls from Jerry Falwell and his brethren. Interviewees testify to the game-changing efficacy of the far right in sabotaging sensible health programs: Grassroots campaigns to educate the public about AIDS were sidetracked by impractical calls for celibacy, and condom distribution was denounced as immoral.

Carlomusto freely samples GMHC's controversial 1985 video "Chance of a Lifetime," an erotic celebration of safer sex through condom use and sensual ploys like "shrimping" (toe sucking), injecting playful tenderness back into sexual exchange. Graphic comics also cheekily promulgated safe sex -- and were promptly castigated by Jesse Helms on the Senate floor.

Docu highlights the unshakable solidarity of the various factions combating AIDS. When Cosmopolitan published an article claiming women could not contract AIDS by sleeping with infected men, gay males protested in droves, while Carlomusto herself filmed the heated meeting between angry feminists and the author of the piece in the magazine's offices.

"Epidemic" ends in a scattershot manner, as the depth and spontaneity of past activism makes present-day efforts come off as weak by comparison. The virus' continuing lethal power, though, is reinforced by a chilling final montage noting the AIDS-related passing of nine of the docu's interview subjects.

Camera (color/B&W, DV), Carlomusto; music, Sam Sutton. Reviewed on DVD, New York, June 16, 2010. (In NewFest, Frameline.) Running time: 70 MIN.