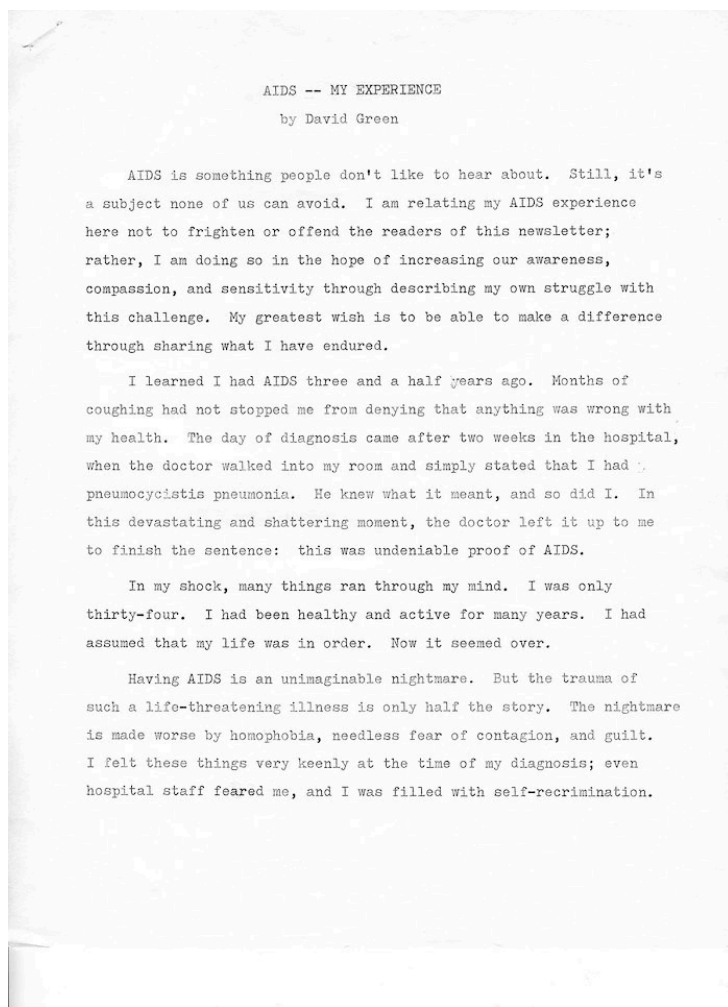


Primary Source: "AIDS -- My Experience" by David Green

Background:

David M. Green was a gay Jewish man who lived in Washington DC. He was working at the Library of Congress when he was diagnosed with AIDS in 1986. Rather than retreating into privacy, he chose to quit his job and channel his energy into AIDS education and advocacy. He spoke at synagogues, youth conventions, and other gatherings to get people to see that AIDS impacted the Jewish community, too. He encouraged Rabbis and community members to take AIDS seriously and to treat LGBTQ Jews and AIDS patients with care and respect. While his impact was growing, Green's health deteriorated. He wrote this testimony during the last week of November 1989; he died of complications related to AIDS on December 14, 1989.



Quote of Note

"As I am changed by the disease, I feel I can be a force for change, too. What I'm going through, good or bad, can ultimately help other people who are also confronting AIDS."

Item Information

Gift of Martin Less in memory of David M. Green, Capital Jewish Museum Collection. Object ID: 2021.21.02

Read the full text on the pages that follow. To see high resolution scans of his writing, click the [link to Archive Record](#).

Themes: LGBTQ rights, AIDS Epidemic, Activism and Visibility

Questions:

1. What is the message that David Green is trying to get across?
2. What power do personal narratives have in shaping public opinion?
3. A major focus of Green's activism was challenging his fellow Jews to care for the sick and advocate for gay rights. What is the value of advocacy within your own community? Alternatively, what is the value of advocacy to people outside of your community?

Full Text

AIDS is something people don't like to hear about. Still, it's a subject none of us can avoid. I am relating my AIDS experience here not to frighten or offend the readers of this newsletter; rather, I am doing so in the hope of increasing our awareness, compassion, and sensitivity through describing my own struggle with this challenge. My greatest wish is to be able to make a difference through sharing what I have endured.

I learned I had AIDS three and a half years ago. Months of coughing had not stopped me from denying that anything was wrong with my health. The day of diagnosis came after two weeks in the hospital, when the doctor walked into my room and simply stated that I had pneumocystis pneumonia. He knew what it meant, and so did I. In this devastating and shattering moment, the doctor left it up to me to finish the sentence: this was undeniable proof of AIDS.

In my shock, many things ran through my mind. I was only thirty-four. I had been healthy and active for many years. I had assumed that my life was in order. Now it seemed over.

Having AIDS is an unimaginable nightmare. But the trauma of such a life-threatening illness is only half the story. The nightmare is made worse by homophobia, needless fear of contagion, and guilt, I felt these things very keenly at the time of my diagnosis; even hospital staff feared me, and I was filled with self-recrimination.

Needless to say, it was difficult to develop a positive attitude about my condition, and a positive attitude is sometimes all you've got to get you through. My situation was devastating not only for me, but for my parents, sister, and lover, who were supportive, but overwhelmed by the news of my condition.

I underwent a long series of drug therapies to rid my lungs of disease. After several months of recovery, I returned to work and its semblance of normalcy, but with a broken spirit. My former joie de vivre had gone. I became secretive about what had been wrong with me; I even kept a little list of those people who "knew". It seems so silly now. But then the shame and stigma of having a disease I thought only "bad" people got was too strong. Who was there to say otherwise in 1986? I was the only person I knew who had AIDS, so I was isolated, lonely, confused, frightened, and hopeless. My doctors gave me "no more than two years" to survive.

Slowly, however, through hard work and perseverance, good medical care, peer support, professional help, and the love of my friends (thank you Bet Mishpachah!), lover, and family, I began to heal emotionally. My frame of mind began to change. I was better able to accept the fact that I had AIDS. And when I was able to live with AIDS, it was easier to be more open with others about my illness. That openness brought out the best in people, who responded with love and support. In spite of periods of ill health and hospitalization, the love of everyone around me has sustained my spirit. Medical treatments help my body to function, but it is people's love that feeds my will to survive.

continued on the next page

There is another side to my AIDS experience which is at least as significant as the familiar suffering, illness, depression, and misery of the disease. That is the part I want to share with you the most. There are certain aspects of AIDS which can be turned to one's advantage. At the beginning of my illness, some people living with AIDS told me how the disease was a window of opportunity. How absurd that sounded then! AIDS could be the ultimate personal challenge, they claimed -- an opportunity for great personal and spiritual growth. (Personally, I was getting tired of growth experiences at that point!)

Let me make it clear that I'm no Pollyanna about AIDS. It's not "the best thing that ever happened to me", as some people with AIDS claim. Still, there are aspects of self-discovery, personal transformation, and spiritual growth to be found along the way. These have made my life more meaningful. Many have died -- this is undeniable - and I think about my own death, too. Sometimes I question why I'm still living. But I think I have a clue. As I am changed by the disease, I feel I can be a force for change, too. What I'm going through, good or bad, can ultimately help other people who are also confronting AIDS.

I have learned that having AIDS is not a static experience. The journey has been a labyrinth of twists and turns. But somehow, because of that or in spite of that, I've discovered that I can still grow. For example, my medical challenges enabled me to make the decision to retire from my government job and start a new career --public speaking. This is something I always wanted to do, but probably never would have. Now, I have the opportunity to speak to many people about living with AIDS. In turn, speaking helps me deal with my own situation.

I realize that not all people with AIDS enjoy the degree of love and support that I have. For some, there are no gifts --only loneliness and fear. It is these people we must reach out to.

My experience living with AIDS has undeniably been traumatic and will continue at times to be so. After several brushes with death, I have changed spiritually. Growth can happen anywhere, even in a hospital.

There can be no doubt that the human spirit will prevail over this plague. Even if we are destroyed physically by it, in death there is not necessarily defeat.

Note: David finished his work on this article during the last week of November, 1989. He died of complications related to AIDS on December 14, 1989.



Photograph Information

Martin F. Less (left) and David M. Green (right) stand together at the "celebration of their togetherness" in 1986. Gift of Martin Less in memory of David M. Green, Capital Jewish Museum Collection.

Education programs at the Museum are made possible, in part, by Sue Ducat in memory of Stanley Cohen, z"l, The Alper Education Fund, The Bresler Family Education Fund, The Michael Goldstein Education Fund, The Doris & Robert I. Silverman Endowment, and The Morse-Loeb Fund.