

Bobbi Campbell: “AIDS Poster Boy” & “AIDS Activist Boy”

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When people think of AIDS activists they often think of prominent figures like Larry Kramer or Peter Dinklage, not Bobbi Campbell. But Bobbi Campbell deserves to be on that list of crucial activists who made a significant impact on the AIDS movement. In 1981, Bobbi Campbell became the sixteenth person in San Francisco diagnosed with Kaposi's Sarcoma (KS) and the first person to come out having AIDS publicly. He soon became the face of the AIDS epidemic as the “AIDS Poster Boy,” yet his impact has not been analyzed deeply and his legacy has not been honored widely.¹ Despite minimal recognition, Bobbi Campbell contributed greatly to the AIDS movement. Furthermore, the effect of his actions far exceeded his expectations. Throughout his life, up until the point when he died of AIDS in 1984, Campbell chronicled his experiences in his diary. Campbell's rhetoric in his diary, as well as interviews and speeches reflects his pride and disbelief in the extent of his influence on the AIDS movement. While Campbell's rhetoric was often scattered and sometimes uninspiring, his actions helped lead the nation towards greater open-mindedness regarding AIDS and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Ultimately, Campbell's meager expectations benefited him because they did not undercut his braveness and allowed him to express audacity that was unparalleled at the time. Campbell's ability to act boldly and shamelessly allowed him to shift the accepted social ideologies and positively impact the AIDS movement.

However, some point out that when Bobbi Campbell died of AIDS in 1984, no real progress in the movement had been made. At the time, the number of deaths due to AIDS was climbing, with an 89% increase in the number of new cases from 1984 to 1985.² President Ronald Reagan had not even mentioned AIDS publicly yet. Therefore, Bobbi Campbell may have been open about AIDS, but the rest of the world was still close-minded. In fact, a 1985 *Los Angeles Times* poll found that a majority of Americans favored quarantining people with AIDS, thereby emphasizing the stigma around the disease.³ While it is true that the AIDS movement still had a long ways to go before changing the minds of Americans about AIDS and the LGBT community, Bobbi Campbell's activism began the slow process of changing the status quo. Ultimately, Campbell, who was driven by an attitude of utter shamelessness, was the first representative of AIDS to act bravely and publicly in order to educate Americans and destigmatize the disease.

Ever since AIDS was first discovered, Bobbi Campbell was a prominent figure in raising awareness. In 1975, Campbell moved to the Castro District in San Francisco – an up-and-coming publicly gay community – to work as a nurse at a local hospital. As an inpatient nurse, Campbell worked closely with many cancer patients and people who would later be diagnosed as AIDS patients. Campbell's work became particularly personal on October 8, 1981, when a dermatologist, Marcus Conant M.D., diagnosed Campbell with KS.⁴ Campbell's diagnosis became an unexpected avenue into AIDS activism. A fellow nurse described Campbell as “politically astute, ... a mover and shaker,” a title which he upheld throughout his entire life.⁵ By December of 1981, Campbell posted pictures of his KS lesions in the window of a local pharmacy and wrote articles in the *San Francisco Sentinel* in order to educate the public about the rising epidemic.⁶ Due to his genuine concern for the gay community and potential AIDS

patients, Campbell acted as the first person to post radical information about AIDS in public. A fellow nurse from the San Francisco General Hospital, Gary Stephen Carr, recalled that “when [he] met Bobbi, he gave [him] a big, wet kiss on the mouth, which was a very political thing that [Bobbi] was doing with people, to see how scared they would be. [...] But it was from meeting Bobbi that day that [Carr] learned about the epidemic.”⁷ Thus, it is evident that Bobbi overlooked social norms and instead maintained his identity. Such genuine and radical behavior began the process of normalizing homosexuality and AIDS.

Furthermore, with the backing of the Shanti Project, Campbell assembled a “gay cancer” support group, recruiting his “KS brothers” in the waiting room of the hospital. The clinic’s head nurse recalled that “[Bobbi] started to make himself available at the clinic and say, ‘I want to meet the patients.’ This was not seen as a friendly gesture by the physicians.”⁸ Campbell completely disregarded the fact that physicians viewed him as “a little off the wall . . . kind of out of control [and even] hysterical,” and instead continued to expand his band of “KS brothers.”⁹ Campbell did not act with the expectation or desire to push a political agenda, but simply to help people with “gay cancer” and educate those who could contract it. In his diary, Campbell described how he was “a real person with AIDS,” who had the goal of helping other real people with AIDS.¹⁰ Nevertheless, just one month after Campbell’s own diagnosis and seven months after the first reported case, Campbell was already breaking down barriers of stigma, despite the judgments of those around him.

Campbell’s first gestures of AIDS activism were monumental, but even more, his actions were sincere displays of his personality rather than planned parts of a movement. In fact, most of Campbell’s public appearances were rarely thought out. In his diary, Campbell wrote that before speaking in front of the White House, “[he edited his] speech as [he] marched – as usual.”¹¹ In this entry, Campbell recalled that even before one of his most prestigious presentations, he acted in his typical fashion of preparing at the last minute. Moreover, Campbell described his speech at the AIDS Forum on August 8, 1983, as “still not fully written at curtain time, as usual” and his speech at the National Institute of Health (NIH) Conference on October 9, 1983, as “[unwritten] when [he] sat down.”¹² Despite his minimal preparation, Campbell viewed his speech in front of the White House as “dynamite,” and highlighted that his AIDS Forum speech received a standing ovation.¹³ While Campbell was not always the most prepared or most eloquent speaker, he acted with a certain authenticity that was crucial to spark change.

Campbell’s routine of minimal preparation actually benefited him because he never had high expectations; therefore, he always exceeded them. Campbell’s positive outlook about his activism inspired him to continue to display unparalleled audacity. This boldness is seen in both his actions and his rhetoric. For example, Campbell chronicled in a diary entry on October 9, 1983: “I had threatened to disrupt the conference and denounce NIH if PWA’s were not included, so Artie and I got to do a “poster session” off in a separate room.”¹⁴ Due to Campbell’s daring relentlessness, he and fellow People With AIDS (PWA) leader Artie Felsen were able to present at the NIH’s Nursing Clinical Conference on AIDS held in Bethesda, Maryland, discussing the “literature [regarding AIDS that they] had developed.”¹⁵ Although Campbell and Artie were not able to present in the main room, Campbell believed that merely being at the conference was a victory. Campbell described that even at their isolated presentation, he and Artie were still able to “nail ‘em.”¹⁶ As a result of Campbell’s actions, the nurses at the

conference were forced to interact with and receive input from “real people” with AIDS. Ultimately, Campbell realized that conversation between doctors and patients was necessary for progress in the AIDS movement.

Furthermore, at Campbell’s final public speech before his death, given outside the 1984 Democratic National Convention (DNC) in San Francisco, he addressed three major themes: rhetoric used regarding AIDS, the concerns of people with AIDS, and the actions that were needed to improve the state of the epidemic. Throughout his speech, Campbell used simple language to display a clear point. For instance, Campbell repeated that “[he had] a message for” the nation, right-wing fundamentalists, Democrats, and more.¹⁷ By using a relentless listing technique, Campbell clearly called for “immediate and massive federal funding to end the AIDS epidemic.”¹⁸ While Campbell’s rhetoric was heartfelt and definitive, it was not particularly persuasive or inspiring. However, Campbell demonstrated authentic boldness on stage by kissing his boyfriend, Bobby Hillard, in the middle of his speech. Although homosexuality was widely unaccepted at the time, Bobbi expressed his “gay love” publicly, making this speech a memorable one.¹⁹ In fact, Campbell’s public display of gay love was one of his proudest accomplishments. After his speech at the DNC, Campbell wrote in his diary that “[it had] been quite some weekend,” exemplifying that his actions exceeded his expectations.²⁰

Moreover, Campbell viewed his appearance on the cover of *Newsweek* where he embraced “his lover” as one of his greatest triumphs. In his diary, he wrote that, “the biggest news of the year is that BOBBY & I ARE ON THE COVER OF NEWSWEEK. Too much... ‘Gay America.’”²¹ Campbell could barely contain his excitement, writing with all capital letters and using choppy sentences. Therefore, the tone of Campbell’s diary entry suggests that he was both shocked and proud of his appearance on the cover of the popular magazine. Moreover, this example of media coverage on “gay love in ‘84” suggests that throughout Campbell’s life, homosexuality became less taboo and more commonly displayed. However, in *The Los Angeles Times’* obituary for Bobbi Campbell, he is described to appear with his “friend” Bobby Hillard on the magazine cover, not his “lover.”²² But ultimately, as the public face of “Gay America” and the “AIDS poster boy,” it is evident that Campbell played a vital role in decreasing the stigma attached to both homosexuality and AIDS.

Bobbi Campbell undoubtedly impacted the AIDS movement. Although he died of the disease before any real scientific or social change was made, Campbell set the precedent for acting boldly and shamelessly in order to motivate change. Ultimately, Campbell was able to display such radical behavior because he never let high expectations scare him or other people’s pushback deter him. Campbell simply expressed his private personality to a public audience. It is evident in Campbell’s diary that he contributed to the AIDS movement more than he ever imagined, and it is evident through Campbell’s activism that he began the process of breaking the status quo regarding homosexuality and AIDS.

¹ Joe Wright, "Bobbi Campbell: Making the New Disease Visible," *American Journal of Public Health*, 2013, accessed October 28, 2018, https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/811663_2.

² U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS," HIV.gov, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Melissa Block and Joe Wright, "Remembering the Early Days of 'Gay Cancer,'" *All Things Considered*, podcast audio, May 8, 2006, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5391495>.

⁵ Wright, "Bobbi Campbell."

⁶ "'Poster Boy' of AIDS Dies at 32," *The Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), August 17, 1984, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁷ Gary Stephen Carr, "The AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco: The Response of the Nursing Profession, 1981-1984," interview by Sally Smith Hughes, Online Archive of California, last modified 1999, accessed December 9, 2018, https://oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt700007g5&brand=oac4&doc.view=entire_text.

⁸ Wright, "Bobbi Campbell."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bobbi Campbell, *Bobbi Campbell Diary*, 1984, accessed November 28, 2018, <https://calisphere.org/collections/3684/?start=24>.

¹¹ Campbell, *Bobbi Campbell Diary*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Wright, "Bobbi Campbell."

¹⁶ Campbell, *Bobbi Campbell Diary*.

¹⁷ Bobbi Campbell, "Bobbi Campbell Speech," speech, July 1984, video file, YouTube, posted by GLBT Historical Society, June 18, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9uceO78lHs>.

¹⁸ Henry Weinstein, "Unionists, Gays Stage Rallies on Convention Eve," *The Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), July 16, 1984, accessed October 28, 2018, http://college.cengage.com/history/ayers_primary_sources/rally_gayrights_1984.htm.

¹⁹ Campbell, "Bobbi Campbell," video file.

²⁰ Campbell, *Bobbi Campbell Diary*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "'Poster Boy'".