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A STAR REPORTER HAD AIDS. HE TURNED IT INTO HIS BEAT.

By MAUREEN DOWD

I was reading the raves for the devastating new movie "Elsinore," a play-within-a-play in which Andrew Scott portrays the Scottish actor Ian Charleson — most famous for "Chariots of Fire." Charleson unexpectedly gets to take on Hamlet at the National Theater in London in 1989 after Daniel Day-Lewis walks off the stage in the middle of a performance and drops out. Charleson takes on the most daunting role in Shakespeare as he is dying of AIDS.

I thought of Jeffrey Schmalz, the New York Times editor and reporter who took on the role of chronicling the AIDS epidemic for the paper in 1992 — even as the disease was ruining his own health. Before he died in 1993 at 39, Jeff wrote poignantly — yet unsparingly — about why the political and medical cavalry would not arrive in time for him.

The Scottish actor and the American journalist were about the same age when they died, as AIDS was raging in London and New York and in most large cities around the world. These talented souls were made of sterner stuff than I. The last thing I would do is take a job dwelling on mortality while I was being consumed by a monster. That took enormous courage.

To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub. Jeff wrote that he had nightmares of waking up in a coffin, even as he held onto a sliver of hope that he would live long enough to see the magic treatment.

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THE NEW YORK TIMES AT 175

This story is part of a series marking 175 years of eyewitness journalism from The New York Times. Read more at nytimes.com/175.

I met Jeff when I came to work on the Metro section of The Times in 1983. He was healthy and on top of the world then, and I was intimidated. Everyone could see he was smart, cultured, dapper, acidly funny, brisk and sometimes brusque. His friend and Times colleague David Dunlap captured Jeff's jaunty, naughty side beautifully in a eulogy.

After Jeff left the Times Building on West 43rd Street for the last time in 1993, David said they kept "waiting for him to round a corner in the newsroom and come bouncing suddenly toward us, eyebrows arched, mustache bristling, humming one of those vague and forever unfinished show-tune fragments of his, ready to immerse us in whatever may be on his mind, perhaps diverted a moment or two by a handsome face across the floor, followed by an unapologetic 'Now, where was I?'"

Jeff kindly invited me, the newcomer, to a dinner with colleagues at a fancy restaurant in Manhattan, with so many courses I struggled to keep up. When I came to Albany for a story, Jeff helped me. As the New York Times bureau chief in New York's capital, he was a lordly presence.

In fact, he dominated much of the Statehouse coverage and held his own against Gov. Mario Cuomo, who was charismatic but could be thin-skinned and bullying — a detriment to his political ambitions. Jeff, a sharp but fair political analyst and a great reporter, chronicled his tensions with the press.

"I learned from him how to push back, not be intimidated and that everything is on the record," said Adam Nagourney of The Times, who in those years was covering Albany for The Daily News.

That was on full display when an irritable Cuomo denounced the Albany reporters as "a cabal" out to get him and make him "look bad" and talked about getting retribution by cutting off a reporter who offended him. One night, the governor called Jeff at home.

"You set out to hurt me and you succeeded," he growled at Jeff. "I hope you sleep well."

The next morning, according to Jeff, "the 54-year-old governor called back to apologize, asking forgiveness for 'an old man with a bad back.'"

In other words, he seemed like the ideal Times man, destined to become executive editor one day, while I felt inadequate, without a glossy pedigree or an Ivy League degree. I agonized over the right way to dress for The Gray Lady and ended up wearing a preppy sweater with a duck on it to the newsroom on my first day. I still shudder when I think about it.

Unease in the Newsroom

It was only after he died that I realized Jeff had not had a glide path to The Times, either. He came from Willow Grove, a suburb north of Philadelphia. When he was 2, his father — an alcoholic — and his mother separated. His mother got a job at Sears and raised Jeff and his sister, Wendy, with help from her parents and siblings. Jeff went to Columbia University on a scholarship. Just as I had once worked the night shift as a clerk at The Washington Star, Jeff worked the night shift as a copy boy at The Times and dropped out of school when he got a promotion to copy editor.

The gifted gay men who surrounded me in The Times's newsroom were cloaked to varying degrees because of the unease of Arthur Ochs "Punch" Sulzberger, the publisher, and Abe Rosenthal, the executive editor, about gays. Rosenthal banned the word "gay" from The Times — a rule reversed only after Max Frankel took over in 1986 — and the paper was slow to give gay rights and AIDS the coverage they deserved.

As Nagourney revealed in his excellent history of the paper, "The Times: How the Newspaper of Record Survived Scandal, Scorn, and the Transformation of Journalism," Rosenthal wrote in his journal that though he would hire a homosexual as a critic, he would not put one on a sensitive beat like the Pentagon or City Hall.

"The homosexual clique was a problem," Rosenthal wrote, "because it was usually subterranean, which gave it a kind of conspiracy atmosphere, and because homosexuals in the clique always were convinced or tried to convince themselves that they were wiser, more acute, 'better' than the others — the old breed."

Jeff's friend and fellow reporter in those years, Arthur Sulzberger Jr. (Punch's son), agreed with me that Jeff seemed like the epitome of what a Times journalist should be.

Maureen Dowd, White House correspondent for The Times from 1988 to 1995, is an Opinion columnist.

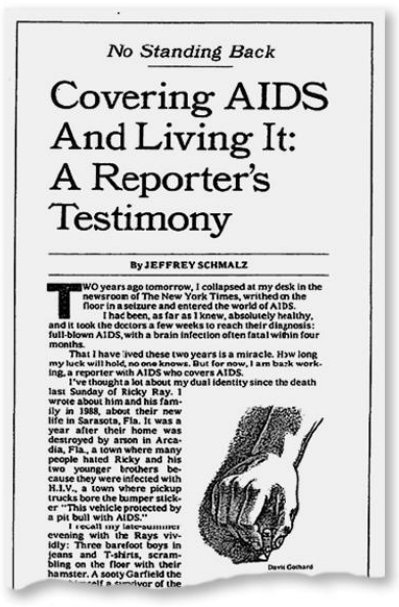


SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES



TERESA ZABALA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Top, marchers in the 1987 Gay Pride Parade on Fifth Avenue in New York. Above, Jeffrey Schmalz working with Eileen Butler in 1975 on The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage. Right, a 1992 article by Mr. Schmalz.



No Standing Back

Covering AIDS And Living It: A Reporter's Testimony

By JEFFREY SCHMALZ

TWO years ago tomorrow, I collapsed at my desk in the newsroom of The New York Times, writhed on the floor in a seizure and entered the world of AIDS.

That had been, as far as I knew, absolutely healthy, and it took the doctors a few weeks to reach their diagnosis: full-blown AIDS, with a brain infection often fatal within four months.

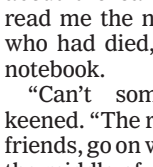
That I have lived these two years is a miracle. How long my luck will hold, no one knows. But for now, I am back working, a reporter with AIDS who covers AIDS.

I've thought a lot about my dual identity since the death last Sunday of Ricky Ray. I wrote about him and his family in 1988, about their new life in Sarasota, Fla. It was a year after their home was destroyed by arson in Arcadia, Fla., a town where many people hated Ricky and his two younger brothers because they were infected with H.I.V., a town where pickup trucks bore the bumper sticker "This vehicle protected by a pit bull with AIDS."

I recall my interviewer evening with the Rays vividly: Three barefoot boys in jeans and T-shirts, scrambling on the floor with their hamster. A sooty Garfield the

Dave Gothard

> 'Some people think that it is the journalism that suffers, that objectivity is abandoned. But they are wrong. If the reporters have any integrity at all, it is they who suffer, caught between two allegiances.'
>
> JEFFREY SCHMALZ, writing in a 1992 essay for The Times.



> 'The greatest sadness was, he was with us at a time when he had to hide so much of his personal life to protect his career. It's a blessing that those days are long gone.'
>
> ARTHUR SULZBERGER JR.

"I always thought he represented so much that reflected the best about The Times — from his journalistic integrity to his commitment to making sure we were both detailed and accurate," Sulzberger told me. "And he was a lovely colleague to work with.

"The greatest sadness was, he was with us at a time when he had to hide so much of his personal life to protect his career. It's a blessing that those days are long gone."

Jeff told his friends that he was sorry he had stayed in the closet so long (even though it was fairly well known that he was gay).

"Not only did Jeff disguise himself in the 1970s — when the social landscape at The Times was as inviting as a bomb crater," Dunlap said. "But he did so through the 1980s, as well, when lesbians and gay men at The Times were encouraged by the new leadership to believe they were not just tolerated but welcome."

As Dunlap recounted, Jeff apologized: "I came very late to this fight, and have borne an incredible guilt complex because of that. And I'm sorry."

After he had a seizure in the newsroom in 1990 and discovered that he had AIDS, he came back transformed. He asked Frankel if he could write about AIDS and gay issues, and became a pioneer — for The Times, and for journalism.

Adam Moss, an editor who was advising the newsroom, sat next to Jeff in "a kind of gay ghetto alcove in the newsroom" when he came back after his collapse. "I was witness as he shed any trace of the neutrality he'd spent a career assuming, got angrier and more impassioned about what was happening to him," Moss told me. "I marveled at his ability to be furious and buoyant at the same time his life was closing in."

'The Prism of AIDS'

I wasn't sure at the time whether being a blend of activist and journalist would work. It was something the newspaper had never allowed and still does not today. Jeff wasn't sure, either. He knew the anger of activists mirrored his own.

"Now I see the world through the prism of AIDS," he wrote in a Times essay titled "Covering AIDS and Living It: A Reporter's Testimony." "I feel an obligation to those with AIDS to write about it and an obligation to the newspaper to write what just about no other reporter in America can cover in quite the same way."

He wrote: "Some people think that it is the journalism that suffers, that objectivity is abandoned. But they are wrong. If the reporters have any integrity at all, it is they who suffer, caught between two allegiances."

He made up for lost time. Along with Randy Shilts, who wrote "And the Band Played On" and was covering the epidemic for The San Francisco Chronicle, he became the brains and face of AIDS coverage. "To have AIDS is to be alone, no matter the number of friends and family members around," Schmalz wrote.

He spent his days talking to scientists and politicians, and to other men and women living with H.I.V. and AIDS — sometimes celebrities like Magic Johnson and Elizabeth Glaser — about their fear of death, their constant monitoring of their T cells, their trepidation that every cold might be the cold that would do them in, their humiliation at being pariahs, their rage at the slow progress on finding a cure. And then Jeff would go home to his Upper West Side apartment and deal with his own roller coaster of "horror, hope, hope, horror" and his fear that he wouldn't wake up the next morning.

> 'I marveled at his ability to be furious and buoyant at the same time his life was closing in.'
>
> ADAM MOSS

Jeff acknowledged this fear in that essay, which he composed feverishly even as his own fevers returned: "As I write this, I feel tired but sharp. The AZT is holding for now. The brain infection, though diminished, is still present, making the fingers of my right hand stiff and clumsy on the keyboard. I use a tape recorder; my short-term memory isn't what it was."

One of the first stories I wrote at The Times in 1983 was about a buddy system set up by the Gay Men's Health Crisis, finding volunteers who would visit dying AIDS patients — often neglected by friends and family — in the hospital.

I interviewed Larry Kramer, the writer and AIDS activist, at his apartment in Greenwich Village.

Kramer, who went on to write "The Normal Heart," a play and later film about the early days of the epidemic, read me the names of 37 of his friends who had died, logged in a small green notebook.

"Can't something be done?" he keened. "The rest of the city, my straight friends, go on with life as usual and I'm in the middle of an epidemic. We're dying. Why is this happening? Is it because we loved each other too much or not enough? I just don't know."

I thought about taking on AIDS as a beat because the paper didn't seem to be focusing on the scourge, even though it was rampaging through New York City. But I ended up being assigned to Washington, where they also weren't focusing on it much.

Like other gay men and lesbians — many of whom woke up from political apathy — Jeff pinned a lot of hope on Bill Clinton, who mentioned AIDS in his 1992 victory speech. But after the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" fiasco, Clinton grew wary of gay issues, and Jeff grew wary of Clinton.

Jeff was also astute about Tony Fauci. "Being the Government's point man on AIDS has made Tony Fauci (rhymes with OUCH-ee) famous," Jeff wrote. "He professes to be solely the scientist. But in fact, he is very much the star and the politician, one year defending modest Reagan-Bush AIDS budget proposals as adequate, the next defending generous Clinton proposals as necessary. He is the activist's enemy — 'Murderer!' Kramer once called him in an essay published in The Village Voice. He is the activist's friend, a comrade in arms, showing up last October at the opening of the Kramer play wearing a red AIDS ribbon."

A Clarion Call

In his final essay, Jeff admitted he was bitter. "I am dying," he wrote. "Why doesn't someone help us?"

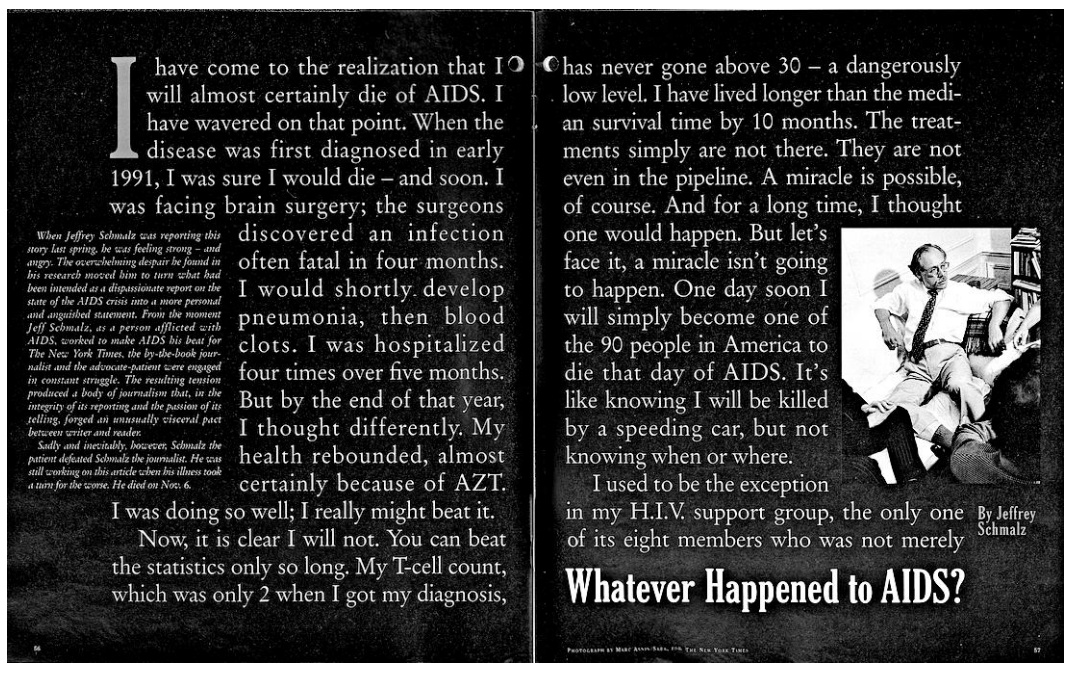
"Let's face it, a miracle isn't going to happen," he continued. "One day soon I will simply become one of the 90 people in America to die that day of AIDS. It's like knowing I will be killed by a speeding car, but not knowing when or where."

Moss and Nagourney helped stitch together that dynamite final essay as Jeff lay dying, and it was published in the magazine in November 1993, after he was gone. "It had significant impact because his expression was so personal and *felt*," Moss said.

The cocktail for AIDS that saved lives was still two years away. Jeff was the last infected friend I had who died before that cocktail arrived, and that was horrible.

"I usually say that my epitaph is not a phrase but the body of my work," he wrote. "I am writing it with each article, including this one. But actually, there is a phrase that I want shouted at my funeral and written on the memorial cards, a phrase that captures the mix of cynicism and despair that I feel right now and that I will almost certainly take to my grave: Whatever happened to AIDS?"

Now we come to a moment when H.I.V. diagnoses in New York City have seen a slight uptick, mainly in low-income neighborhoods. As I reread Jeff's fierce, illuminating stories, filled with remarkable reporting and remarkably little self-pity, I am proud of him. While others were cringing away, he was documenting the despair and failures and cowardice and bravery and honesty and denial, creating an epic account of those plague years. He offered a cri de coeur from a heart that was breaking, echoing into the present moment: Attention must be paid.



When Jeffrey Schmalz was reporting this story last spring, he was feeling strong – and angry. The overwhelming despair he found in his research moved him to turn what had been intended as a dispassionate report on the state of the AIDS crisis into a more personal and anguished statement. From the moment Jeff Schmalz, as a person afflicted with AIDS, worked to make AIDS his beat for The New York Times, the by-the-book journalist and the advocate-patient were engaged in constant struggle. The resulting tension produced a body of journalism that, in the integrity of its reporting and the passion of its telling, forged an unusually visceral pact between writer and reader.

Sadly and inevitably, however, Schmalz the patient defeated Schmalz the journalist. He was still working on this article when his illness took a turn for the worse. He died on Nov. 6.

I have come to the realization that I will almost certainly die of AIDS. I have wavered on that point. When the disease was first diagnosed in early 1991, I was sure I would die – and soon. I was facing brain surgery; the surgeons discovered an infection often fatal in four months. I would shortly develop pneumonia, then blood clots. I was hospitalized four times over five months. But by the end of that year, I thought differently. My health rebounded, almost certainly because of AZT. I was doing so well; I really might beat it.

Now, it is clear I will not. You can beat the statistics only so long. My T-cell count, which was only 2 when I got my diagnosis, has never gone above 30 – a dangerously low level. I have lived longer than the median survival time by 10 months. The treatments simply are not there. They are not even in the pipeline. A miracle is possible, of course. And for a long time, I thought one would happen. But let's face it, a miracle isn't going to happen. One day soon I will simply become one of the 90 people in America to die that day of AIDS. It's like knowing I will be killed by a speeding car, but not knowing when or where.

I used to be the exception in my H.I.V. support group, the only one of its eight members who was not merely

By Jeffrey Schmalz

Whatever Happened to AIDS?

An essay by Schmalz in The New York Times Magazine in November 1993.