

# Salute to soldiers in war against AIDS

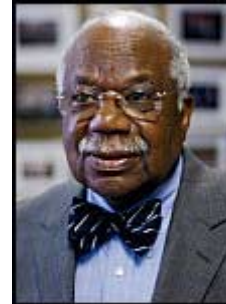
## Leaders of struggle to beat the disease

By JULIAN KESNER, CHRISTOPHER CULLEN and JACOB E. OSTERHOUT  
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When AIDS first emerged in New York, people were so terrified of the disease that patients were shunned - at times even by nurses, doctors and social workers.

But almost immediately, heroes began to emerge to fight the disease as well as the ignorance and discrimination associated with it.

Some of those grabbed headlines - such as the fiery Larry Kramer, founder of the Gay Men's Health Crisis, and state Sen. Thomas Duane, the first elected official in the state to run as an openly HIV-positive candidate.



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Others toiled behind the scenes - for instance, Dr. Donna Mildvan, director of AIDS Research at Beth Israel Medical Center and one of the first physicians to link cases in the emerging epidemic. Then there's Columbia University's Dr. Zena Stein, a pioneer in the movement to provide microbicides so women could protect themselves.

### **Dr. Beny Primm**

Some unlikely heroes emerged, including Princess Diana, with those iconic images of her hugging AIDS patients. The philanthropy of Bill Gates, the policies of President Bush and the activism of former President Bill Clinton brought fresh energy to the battle.

Because of such fighters, AIDS is no longer a death sentence, and patients are no longer condemned to despair.

Here are some of the other champions in the fight against the HIV menace:

### **Mathilde Krim, Ph.D.**

#### **Founding chairwoman, amfAR**

Krim had already made a name for herself after having helped develop a method for determining sex prenatally in the 1950s. She was also one of the first researchers to study the causes of cancer.

In 1981, when cases of a new immunodeficiency syndrome were reported in New York City, she immediately understood the seriousness of the threat.

Concerned over the lack of public support and government funds for attacking the disease, Krim established the first private organization to support AIDS research in 1983. Initially, amfAR awarded research grants and distributed accurate information to U.S. legislators and a poorly informed public.

But as the AIDS epidemic grew, so did amfAR — into one of the top nonprofits dedicated to the support of innovative AIDS research. Since 1985, it has invested nearly \$250 million in HIV prevention, treatment and public policy.

**Craig Miller**  
**Founder and director of AIDS Walk**

In 1986, then-26-year-old Miller organized the first AIDS Walk New York. "I never imagined that I would be doing this work 20 years later," Miller, now 46, says.

The AIDS Walk has grown over the years, spreading to three other cities. Last year, in New York alone, 45,000 participants walked in Central Park and raised more than \$5.8 million.

"When the city granted us a permit to use Central Park, that was a proud moment. It was important both practically and symbolically," Miller says.

He hopes to someday be able to concentrate on issues other than AIDS. "There are many other things that are important to me in this world, and I would be delighted to turn my attention to them — but not until we are at a better place with the epidemic," he says.

**Dr. Hermann Mendez**  
**Executive director, Children's Hope Foundation**

It was March 1981 — months before the first officially documented AIDS case — when Mendez found himself puzzling over the case of a 7-month-old boy with an unusual case of pneumonia. The child, it turned out, was HIV-positive.

"I was terrified," recalls Mendez. "We set up shop in these drug-treatment clinics and told mothers we were there to take care of their babies. I even remember a woman who had no more veins to draw blood from."

Over the past 25 years, Mendez's unflinching care and concern have helped to virtually wipe out pediatric AIDS in New York. Last year, there were only about a dozen documented new cases in the state. Meanwhile, the risk of a mother transmitting HIV to her infant has been reduced to about 2% in HIV-positive women.

Mendez is wrapping up an 18-year woman-to-infant transmission study, the most comprehensive ever on the subject, and is planning another study focusing on infants.

**Dr. Beny Primm**  
**Founder and executive director, Addiction Research and Treatment Corp.**

While many turn their backs on down-and-out drug addicts, Primm has come to their rescue.

Once AIDS took hold in America, Primm focused on the disease's intimate relationship with drug addiction. In the process, he became one of the world's foremost experts on HIV and AIDS. "I don't care who conspired to give us HIV," he says with a sense of urgency. "You have to do something."

After all these years, his no-nonsense philosophy remains simple: Find out if you have HIV.

"Ninety percent out there infected with HIV are having unprotected sex, and unknowingly they are infecting others. That is the problem," he said.

**Dr. Donna Futterman**  
**Director, Adolescent AIDS Program, Montefiore Medical Center**

Getting messages across to teens is always hard. But when it comes to HIV and AIDS, Futterman knows that failure to do so can be devastating.

"Young people are so vulnerable," says the 54-year-old pediatrician. "More than three-quarters of the young women never know that their partner was HIV-positive. . . . The traditional messages don't work."

Futterman completed med school at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the 1980s as the epidemic was beginning. "I'm a gay woman, and this was clearly affecting my community," says Futterman. "The young gay guys still don't get the support they need. Some think being HIV-positive is inevitable."

Futterman has served on 35 government- and medical-research committees over the years, and won awards for her HIV work from publications specializing in issues affecting gays, such as *The Advocate*, *POZ* and the Web site *The Body*.

"Every five years is a new generation," she says. "You have to be consistent — and sustained."

**Jesus Aguais**  
**Founder, AID FOR AIDS**

Jesus Aguais was working as an HIV counselor at St. Vincent's Medical Center in the mid-1990s when he began noticing that people were throwing out expensive retroviral medications because of regimen changes or side effects.

Aguais began quietly stockpiling the discarded drugs. One day, a Venezuelan woman arrived at his office.

"She didn't have money for the treatment, but I happened to have it in my drawer," says Aguais. "It changed my whole mind — I realized we could do this in an organized manner."

A decade later, Aguais' AID FOR AIDS is the largest U.S. HIV-drug-recycling program, collecting \$4.2 million worth of medications last year alone. But there's still more to be done — \$800 million worth of HIV drugs are still discarded in this country each year.

Unable to redistribute drugs legally here, Aguais sends them to 24 countries as humanitarian aid, helping thousands of people.

"Seeing so many people stay alive, I guess that's why I'm healthy," says the HIV-positive Aguais. "The most horrible thing in my life became such a powerful thing to help so many people."

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