



Finding Larry Kramer

How the legendary AIDS activist made his way back to GMHC

May 15, 2017 By [Mark S. King](#)

Kelsey Louie and I are standing outside the door of Larry Kramer's apartment in New York City. Kelsey has already tried the bell and then, after a time, knocks twice. I have the sensation, one I have rarely experienced, of my heart pounding in my ears.

I have never met Larry Kramer, but like most gay men of a certain age, and particularly those of us living with HIV, his place in our lives is iconic. He is arguably the most consequential person in AIDS activism history. As we wait in the hallway, Kelsey and I are perfectly silent, our heads cocked toward the door, listening with the intensity of safecrackers.

We are about to enter the apartment where Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the first AIDS agency ever created, was founded in 1981. The apartment of the man who also cofounded ACT UP, the activist coalition that forced health officials to open their eyes to the epidemic during the late 1980s.

I realize that I am literally holding my breath.

Kelsey knows exactly how I feel. In 2014, he made this same pilgrimage to Larry's home—but with far more at stake than a magazine interview. At that time, as the newly hired head of GMHC, Kelsey was engaged in a quixotic mission to heal a painful rupture in AIDS history.

Kelsey and Larry at the 2017 GMHC gala

Courtesy of GMHC/Mathew McDermott

"I remember walking from the elevator on his floor," Kelsey told me, "and I turned a corner, and there he was, walking toward his door, with some difficulty. He was exercising by walking the hallway, I think, because he had just been hospitalized. I froze." Kelsey couldn't imagine meeting Larry during what felt like a private moment, so he backed up and hid around a corner until he heard Larry's door open and close.

Kelsey's business with Larry that day was the result of an epiphany Kelsey had experienced a couple of months earlier. Before officially beginning his new job at GMHC, Kelsey was invited to a screening of *The Normal Heart*, the star-studded HBO production of Larry Kramer's theatrical primal scream that was first produced off-Broadway in 1985, just as the epidemic was raging, unabated, outside the theater. The play outlined in agonizingly personal terms the dawn of AIDS in New York City, Larry's outrage over the inaction of city officials and his cofounding of GMHC.

The story also lays bare Larry's own inability to, for lack of a better term, be a team player. In real life and as portrayed in *The Normal Heart*, Larry was a loudmouthed, traumatized, mercurial revolutionary who exhausted friends and foes alike. In the real-life plot's final indignity, Larry is removed from the GMHC board and banished from the organization founded in his living room.

Kelsey felt thunderstruck by the end of the film. "I sat for several minutes in the dark theater, with just the white lettering of the credits scrolling," he told me. "For the first time, I felt the full weight of what I was about to take on at GMHC, the enormous impact of the agency on the gay community, on New York and even the world. It was transformative."

And he instantly knew there was something he had to do. Something no one else had accomplished in the past 30 years or had even cared to try. “I knew in that moment, at the end of that movie screening,” Kelsey said, “that I had to bring Larry Kramer back into the arms of GMHC. This separation simply could not stand.”

After discussing the delicate situation with his board of directors, Kelsey went to Larry’s apartment with a bold offer. He would extend an olive branch on behalf of the agency and invite Larry to the GMHC 2015 gala as a special guest.

Their initial meeting went well. Very well. Larry peppered Kelsey with questions about Kelsey’s plans for GMHC, and they talked about the crucial role of activism. They also bonded over their shared opinion that a cure for HIV is mandatory. It was the beginning of a reconciliation.

Not only did Larry attend, but he also accepted the group’s first Lifetime Achievement Award, acknowledging in his speech how moving it was to be welcomed back into the arms of his “first child.” It was an emotional homecoming and just the outcome Kelsey had envisioned. “It’s without a doubt the best thing I have ever done,” Kelsey told me.

Since then, Kelsey and Larry have forged a warm friendship that people around them describe as a kind of love affair. Larry has attended several GMHC events since the gala and has even spoken at an agency staff meeting. He is also just as likely to advise Kelsey on his love life as on advocacy issues. It’s the kind of mentorship any gay man might dream of, with the elderly legend constantly dispensing advice to the 42-year-old agency head.

Getting to know Larry required Kelsey to forgo hero worship and be himself. “That’s my advice for you, when you meet him,” Kelsey told me, knowing how fraught with anticipation I was. “Just be yourself. That’s your only defense.”

Kelsey’s words are now replaying in my mind as I stand in the hallway of Larry’s building and the door to his apartment, at long last, clicks open.

In an instant, all the images of Larry I have seen are replaced by the 81-year-old man who greets us. He hugs Kelsey lovingly and then shakes my hand. “You’re so tall,” he tells me in a soft, strained voice. “Thank you,” I respond, idiotically.

The apartment is spacious for New York City and overflowing with the work of an accomplished writer with a long career amid the literary elite. One side of the living room is overtaken with tables stacked with books, magazines and manuscripts. Bookshelves across the longest wall are filled. It is the home of a man of letters and his many, many words.

Larry Kramer's bookshelfNathan Perkel

There is evidence, too, of Larry's health battles. A hospital bed, presumably a remnant of his latest

brush with mortality, has been relegated to a far corner, its only utility now as another flat surface to hold yet more books and projects. Pill bottles are stacked high on the dinette table, like sand castles of amber plastic.

Larry introduces me to his husband, David, an attentive presence blessed with dashing good looks. Larry carefully settles into his favorite chair and immediately begins questioning Kelsey about a man he has been dating.

"You see?" Kelsey says to me, speaking in the heightened tone we use when someone in the room is hard of hearing. "He always asks about my love life!"

"Why not?" Larry responds, turning to his husband. "I just want everyone to be in love as much as I am." A serene smile spreads across his face as he keeps his eyes on David.

Larry's unabashed display of affection isn't surprising, really. All his writing, including his screenplays, his controversial novel, *Faggots*, and even *The Normal Heart*, is at its core about the pursuit and potency of love. The poignant secret hiding in plain sight is that Larry Kramer is a romantic.

And yet, watching Larry's blissful smile now, I realize it isn't a common image in the catalog of AIDS history. His other features are far more familiar, like the hawkish dark eyebrows, usually seen furrowed in indignation over the latest outrage. Or that remarkable mouth, larger and fuller lipped than any mouth has a right to be, as if granted by the gods to the very man who would know how to use it, typically pictured opened wide, shouting, seething, baring teeth, crying out, "Plague! We are in the middle of a fucking PLAGUE!"

Kelsey and I gather near Larry, and I ask him about GMHC. "The separation must have wounded you," I suggest.

"It was a painful severance for me," he agrees. "But I moved on. Starting ACT UP became what I had once hoped for GMHC." ACT UP is another tender subject for Larry, given its rise to prominence in 1987, producing AIDS protests of shock and awe, only to fade from view once new HIV treatments were introduced in the 1990s.

"I still don't understand why every gay person is not an activist," Larry muses. "I worry we have to fight this all again. I hope we have the strength to say, 'I am entitled to the same rights as everyone else, and I am going to fight for them.'"

But things are better for LGBT people now, I counter. Marriage equality is the law of the land. Gay men just want to retreat to the suburbs and enjoy their families. "That's just putting your head in the sand," Larry warns. "They're already chipping away at our rights in Congress. Marriage will be in the courts forever and will have to be defended. That will take a lot of people getting off their asses."

His outlook on the HIV epidemic is no more optimistic. "I don't see us in a very rosy place," he

cautions. Larry was also initially critical of Truvada as PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), the daily pill to prevent getting HIV, and although he supports PrEP, his skepticism remains.

“It’s not going to save us as a people. I’m worried it is giving us permission to...” He drifts off in worry.

“So you think gay men are still fucking each other to death?” I ask, echoing one of his infamous, polarizing statements from years ago.

Larry physically winces, and I fear I have offended him. “You make it sound so...” He can’t capture the right word.

“Look, this isn’t rocket science,” he argues, shifting gears. “We have a responsibility to our bodies and to the people we care about. I am not against sex,” he declares, with some exasperation, tired of his views being oversimplified for so long. “I am just begging for responsibility.”

It is clear that Larry sees a prevention strategy like PrEP as a partial solution to a larger problem, that of a gay culture overly fixated on its sexual freedoms. I challenge his thinking on this a bit, listing reasons why gay men act out sexually, such as our isolation and loneliness. “We all have problems,” Larry responds simply. “All feeling people are lonely.”

It is quite a statement. “I love being gay,” he offers as if to explain himself. “I believe we are better than other kinds of people. That kept me going when I was exiled and a pariah.”

Our conversation turns to his legacy, but Larry keeps deflecting my questions about it. When he cringes at my use of the word hero, Kelsey intervenes.

“You taught me to fight and to use my voice, and I am using it,” Kelsey tells him. “You are a hero to many people, Larry.”

“Do you feel that, Larry?” I chime in. The two of us are actually ganging up on Larry Kramer to make him admit the impact of his life’s work. “Do you know how much you are loved?” Larry displays subtle bemusement, and he takes a moment. We wait.

Larry Kramer, Mark S. King and Kelsey LouieNathan Perkel

“One of the most important people in my life was Margaret Ramsay, my agent,” he tells us finally. “She handled every great literature writer there was. She said to me, ‘Don’t ever listen to what people say about you. It just gets in the way.’” He looks up at me. “Yes, I know people are always rushing up to tell me these things, how they are alive because of me...” He shakes his head, waving away the thought.

“But that is factually correct, don’t you think?” I ask.

“I don’t know. It only gets in the way. I don’t let myself think about it. There’s always more I want to do with my life,” he concludes, shifting from any talk of his past, “there are still fights I believe in.”

I had approached this interview thinking about the circular nature of life. How Larry’s relationship with GMHC had come full circle. How the organized protests against President Trump are taking inspiration from the ACT UP playbook. But now I realize there are no circles in the life of Larry Kramer. There are only straight lines in forward motion.

The day is getting late. David has to get their dog to the vet. Larry has to take his pills. Kelsey needs to help Larry figure out a problem with his computer. It is time to say our goodbyes.

Strolling through Larry’s neighborhood, I remember a quote from *The Normal Heart* that I meant to ask him about. At one point, the main character, Ned, who is based on Larry, tells his friends,

“That’s how I want to be remembered: as one of the men who won the war.”

I wonder whether Larry truly believes himself to be nothing more than one among many men, or whether he will ever allow himself the satisfaction of knowing he is something far greater in the eyes of history.

And then I realize that my question, and whatever answer Larry might produce, would only get in the way.

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