

BOOKS OF JAMES

JAMES WENTZY

Born in Brookings, South Dakota, James Wentzy moved to New York City in 1976. Through out the next decade he wrote his journals, later to be referred to as **Books of James**. He was a struggling artist and photographer in a vibrant post Stonewall New York. In 1990 James was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. His response was to become an ACT UP member and an AIDS Video Activist. As Producer/Director of DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activists) he documented over 700 hours of AIDS video, producing over 160 documentary 30-minute programs for telecast weekly series in New York City *AIDS Community Television* – reporting the community responses to the crisis on the front line. The show is still on air biweekly in the Manhattan Neighborhood Network. James continues today as the webmaster for ACT UP New York.

Conversation with James Wentzy

What is your contact with home (South Dakota)? I'd have to put a bumper sticker on my car saying "From South Dakota" if I ever visit. I have lost touch with the people there and the rest of conservative America. It seems very distant.

Live in same apartment in NYC as in film? Cremation is preferable to moving. Been here since 1982.

What was it like in NYC during the late 70's early 80's for you? NYC represented infinite possibilities. Carefree. I don't think my shyness has changed. I was never a big scorer. Like any male I thought about sex a lot.

HIV/AIDS never been accepted as epidemic? More fundamentally this country has never accepted sex as a pleasure. We are really hung up with sex and since HIV/AIDS is often thought to be about nothing but sex. That hang up carries over.

Chronicler or participant in activism? Definitely participant but never liked walking around in circles and chanting. So video recording was a good excuse to participate and do my own thing. Recently students at NYU asked if I considered myself a film maker or an activist. I didn't hesitate to answer "activist". I made the TV program because it needed to be done and no one else was doing it. I consider myself to be a third generation activist. The first generations were really short lived. The first wave was around 1982 when phone lines were established by the community. It wasn't until 1994 that the government started establishing hotlines and they asked community, "How do we do this?" The second generation started ACT UP. I started in 1990 and we were the third generation. People were already getting burned out when I joined.

AIDS Community Television? When I started documenting the actions I realized that without an audience the process was incomplete. NYC has the facility to broadcast not-for-profit material. I always knew that I would go this way. It had taken a number of years to get my skills to this point, however. It became such a large part of my life that when someone asked how I was I'd say, "Watch my show." It wasn't about me but it was my work!

ACT UP had some success – could it have been more successful or did it reach its goals? ACT UP had a number of successes. Obviously the ultimate goal of eliminating the threat of

HIV/AIDS has not been achieved. It certainly changed society in many respects. Nothing in this epidemic would have been changed for the better without direct action by brave courageous radical people.

How does ACT UP see things now; is it still in existence? Technically yes but in reality it is irrelevant – in terms of the present as opposed to historically. This happened not by fault of ACT UP but the loss of the gay community. I don't have an explanation for why the community diminished.

You've continued your involvement with Community TV? Only in the most minor way. Only because of inertia. I'm still on air (re-runs) but I don't do new work. I did a documentary a couple of years ago and put a lot of the history into a feature length film. I still do some "armchair activist work" – I maintain the web site.

What might motivate people again? I've often said that things have to get worse before they get better. People forget that anything that has been changed can always be changed back again. For example mandatory testing might be imposed and everyone will be required to be tested.

(Interview by Peter McPherson on May 9, 2006, 6PM EST)