

**Discourse of HIV/AIDS at Lafayette between 1989-1997 in relation to sexual behavior
and effect on awareness of the campus**

Kendall Berry

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The 1960's and 1970's are remembered as being a time of sexual liberation and freedom, but attitudes shifted as the 1980's brought about fear of a sexual epidemic: HIV and AIDS. In 1981, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention first recognized AIDS as a syndrome caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (CDC). While it was first recognized widely as only affecting gay males and needle-drug users, its impact is widespread, reaching out to other populations and beyond US borders. HIV/AIDS had become especially prevalent in the mid 80's, affecting thousands of young people, yet many questioned exactly what it would mean in their own lives and communities. Its prevalence was first noted to occur in gay communities and it took a few years for its pervasiveness to be seen in other communities.

The HIV/AIDS discourse in *The Lafayette*, a student newspaper, was used as a medium to discourage college students from sexual intercourse and subliminally placed guilt on those who chose to be engaged with such activities. The history of the discourse of HIV/AIDS at Lafayette College reinforces power of privilege and the ability to choose what you do and don't have to be a part of. Once HIV/AIDS became a part of the common discourse at Lafayette in the early 1990's, it had a direct impact on the ways in which sexual behavior was discussed. Without realizing it, the awareness about HIV/AIDS on this campus created a climate of discussing sex without the erotic and desensitized sexual behavior to be limited to sexual intercourse or abstinence. After a group of students in collaboration with the administration fought to bring the AIDS Quilt to Lafayette, it sparked a deeper discussion of acceptance and acknowledgement of sexual behaviors other than ones own. *The Lafayette* provided a medium in which to analyze the sentiments of the student body during an extremely influential time. Before one can look at the change of

HIV/AIDS discourse throughout 1989-1997, one needs to understand why the conversation started when it did.

The 1980's were booming with discussion about HIV/AIDS as it became prevalent in many different communities around the United States, yet these conversations took almost a decade to reach Lafayette College. One of the first recorded uses of the word "AIDS" in *The Lafayette* was in an article posted by Dr. Alan Johnson in November 1989, which warned the campus of a growing problem. In this article, "AIDS: A frightening reality", he grappled with the notion that AIDS was a rising problem in our society whether or not we choose to acknowledge it on the college campus. He was able to shed light on the fact that AIDS on the college campus was a relatively new concept for many of the students and in a later article he wrote, "The problem has been neatly compartmentalized to poor underprivileged communities, IV drug users and homosexuals" ("The Medicine Man"). This was the first indication that society had isolated specific communities and left those who said to be "unaffected" by the problem, out of the discussion. The media and news had a strong influence in portraying specific identities as being those most highly affected by AIDS/HIV, and it took some communities longer than others to realize its importance. *The Lafayette* didn't publish student input on the subject until the end of 1990, even though Dr. Alan Johnson had been posting since the end of 1989. Despite what seemed like an attitude of invincibility by the students, traditional college aged students were at the highest risk for contracting HIV ("The Medicine Man"). It was two more years following Dr. Johnson's post that discourse started within the Lafayette Community. In a 1992 editorial entitled, "The Face of AIDS" a student wrote about her realization that AIDS had been impacting people in her community and that she

didn't open up her eyes to it, "We are not the isolated, sterile community many students believe. It will not be long before you know someone who dies from AIDS." Her acknowledgement of the importance of such an epidemic stemmed from the realization that her professor had a connection to someone who had lost his life from the virus. Fellow students experienced similar realizations and a movement at Lafayette caught on. It is easy in a college setting to get swept up in a bubble of education, but the student made an astute recognition that communities are intertwined and cannot be untangled like many pretend to do.

While it is important for students to define their learning environment and guide campus discourse, the lack of reference to HIV/AIDS in *The Lafayette* during the 1980's reinforces the power of privilege. There is no question that by the end of 1980, AIDS had affected thousands of individuals, yet nothing had been discussed on campus and reported in *The Lafayette* in order to understand such a huge problem. In consideration of how AIDS was first associated with gay men and IV drug users, an artificial divide was established that created a negative sentiment towards those with the virus. Even though it had been made under false pretenses, heterosexuals and people of higher economic status were "excused" from having to pay attention; that was until an increasing number of heterosexual people became diagnosed with the virus. Once more people were discovered to have HIV/AIDS (past gay and IV drug users) it was then that they joined the movement. Nonetheless, these individuals were able to choose if they wanted to be a part of the movement or not. For others, it was something that they had to live with on a daily basis, knowing that they or their family member were on the path of no hope. It is so easy to dismiss something if it isn't pertinent in your life, and Lafayette missed an opportunity to

be involved with something greater than just the school community. Once discussion began to pick up on Lafayette's campus and in the surrounding Lehigh Valley, issues surrounding HIV/AIDS became more about how to not get the virus and how that would impact sexual behavior on a college campus.

While AIDS was only in the back of students minds at the end of 1990, the school began to implement safe sex practices in order to combat the risk of contracting STD's and AIDS. School administration made it mandatory for all Resident Advisors to have condoms available for use if needed. It started off as a way to ensure that those who chose to engage in sexual activity would have a viable option to do so safely, but it turned into a means of sharing sentiments about sexual contact in general. Needless to say, not everyone was in agreement of the policy, "If we would stop letting our hormones master us and just exercise a little self-control, we would see a lot fewer cases of VD, AIDS, and herpes. It's time for the administration to stop lying to us and say that this is OK, and giving us the means to avoid responsibility" ("Condom Policy Questioned" 1990). Dave Learn, the author of this article, equates sexual intercourse with a lack of responsibility and deems it as a failure to abstain from responding to hormonal surges. The author of the article suggests that it's the administration's responsibility to control whom is and isn't having sex, and ultimately it isn't up to the individual. In efforts to promote safe sex practices taken by the school, *The Lafayette* inadvertently patronized those who chose to engage in such actions by including a harsh excerpt from *The Medicine Man*, "Obviously, rethinking your value system may be the best alternative" ("Common Sense/Condom Sense").

Even when Lafayette students were choosing to practice safe sex, Health Education Coordinator Cindy Adams used HIV/AIDS prevention as a means of putting guilt on those who are sexually active. In an AIDS protection article she wrote, "Refrain from intimate sexual activity in which body fluids (especially semen, blood & vaginal secretions) are shared. Opt instead for passionate kissing, massages, hugs, hot phone calls, etc. The options for the safest ways to express your affections are limited only by your own imagination. If you must partake of intimate sex..." which focuses on alternatives to sexual intercourse but uses words like "must" to convey an undertone to the message ("Why you should care about AIDS"). Even though the point of the article was directed towards AIDS prevention, blame is placed on sexually active people and it shifts the way that students feel like they can talk about sex within the campus environment. If the Health Education Coordinator isn't conveying an open mind when it comes to sexual intercourse, it will further discourage students from discussing safe sex and end up making even more risky decisions.

In connection to Cindy Adams' article about HIV/AIDS and other article submissions, the Co-editor in chief of *The Lafayette* in March of 1996 submitted an article regarding the loss of the "sensual human" in regards to HIV/AIDS awareness. In efforts to "scare" people away from having sexual interactions with one another, Kristine Zeigler argued that health organizations have pushed people away from talking about the erotic and sensual. With the sometimes overwhelming amount of information regarding safe sex, Zeigler asks, "But why doesn't the information we receive about sex ever tell us that it can be a way for you to explore a deeper level of emotion, an artistic behavior, a sensuous curve or surface?" In asking these tough questions, she was able to critically look at the

way that “American culture informs society about sexual health” and points out that it isn’t doing all that it should be doing. It is obvious that up until this point, sexual health in *The Lafayette* has been looked at through a restrictive lens; one that doesn’t encompass the human as an erotic. Zeigler’s article is one of the first that began to really question how HIV/AIDS awareness impacts the discourse of sex for pleasure. In accordance to the relationship HIV/AIDS awareness should have with sexual behavior, Zeigler puts it perfectly, “No one should be taught that [sex] this is naughty, disgusting, immoral, or deadly. Precautions—fine. Guilt—let’s toss it to the wind. It’s just a way for others to take our souls and wring them dry” (“Don’t forget, I’m a sensual human”).

In September 1997, Cindy Abram submitted “How to have sex at Lafayette” which outlined the risks associated with sexual intercourse including HIV. The tone of the article had shifted from her first article (1995- which pushed a purely abstinence standpoint) to one that outlined the risks and acknowledged the benefits of sex in a partnership. While still not entirely open to the ideas mentioned in Zeigler’s article, it was evident that there was a shift in discourse about accepted sexual behavior in relation to HIV/AIDS. This was also the first time that personal choice in sexuality expression was mentioned, “As an individual, you need to decide for yourself how you want (or even if you want) to express your sexuality...Dare to do what is truly comfortable for you; not what is most visible or seems ‘cool’” (“How to have sex at Lafayette”). Instead of assuming that all students were in a rush to have sex whenever they wanted, there seemed to be an understanding that not all people express their sexuality in the same way. Even in talking about benefits for partners in sexual intercourse, there was some discussion of pleasure from sex. Discourse was changing, but there were still assumptions being made in regards to those partnerships

and who was in them. In attempts to promote HIV/AIDS prevention, *The Lafayette* subsequently created an environment of fear surrounding appropriate sexual behavior and discouraged open communication. Because prominent figures contributed to the push towards an abstinence only approach for prevention towards the early 1990's, it created a climate that discouraged honest discussion about sexual needs, safety, and pleasure, but towards the end of 1990's a shift was beginning to be seen. In order to increase awareness of HIV/AIDS students brought the AIDS Quilt to Lafayette as part of a Sexual Awareness week.

The AIDS Quilt was brought to Lafayette College from April 26-April 28 in 1992 in order to commemorate the thousands of lives lost from the AIDS virus. Along with honoring those who had passed, the quilt acted as a catalyst of necessary, but tough conversations at Lafayette. A senior at the time, Gregg Be, commented on the experience of having the quilt on campus, "The Quilt itself inspires questioning and debate about topics which are uncomfortable to talk about...but we need to talk about these things, no matter how uncomfortable we may feel...it is going to promote discussion about topics usually untouched on this campus" ("Something positive"). The students at Lafayette had no choice but to engage in these conversations. In this way AIDS was able to guide conversation in a direction that would address issues regarding sexual behaviors that would have otherwise not have been acknowledged. Because of the deep ties HIV/AIDS has with sexual behavior, it is important to be mindful of the implications of only talking about sexual behavior from one perspective. It is easy to overlook sexual behaviors that don't align with the established "norm", but when educating people about preventative options, it is important to consider things outside of the "standard". Later in the article, he talks

more about the conversations that need to happen, "Sexual habits are usually not the topic of casual conversation, and yet in association with the Quilt display, condoms—ribbed condoms—were handed out in Farinon" ("Something positive"). This reinforces the power that the Quilt display had on students in that it got them thinking about their own sexual behavior without feeling guilty or shamed for their actions, rather, empowered.

Throughout an 8-year span of *The Lafayette*, it is evident that the discourse on HIV/AIDS adapted based off of the changing climate at the school. While there seems to have be no discourse during the rise of HIV/AIDS in the 1980's, the conversations bloomed in the 1990's and the articles in *The Lafayette* are a testament to the challenges that people faced discussing human sexuality during this time. The lack of discourse in the 1980's at Lafayette makes one question the power of privilege and how one has choice to acknowledge a truth whether or not it is applicable to them. This privilege can mask a truth until it becomes something applicable to their life. Just because one can ignore it doesn't mean that it isn't there. Understanding one's privilege and using it to create a movement or even start a simple conversation is what will guide society to be more open-minded about individuals and communities that don't fit into the current established norm. In another article written by senior, Gregg Bethel, he mentions the importance of the disease, "This is a disease which affects us all. I hope we can ALL work towards understanding that" ("Is there a problem, gentlemen?"). Inadvertently, the HIV/AIDS epidemic shaped the way that Lafayette discussed sexual behavior on the college campus. In establishing a serious tone about preventative measures to avoid HIV/AIDS infection, students struggled with the dichotomy of sexual freedom in college and the underling tone of abstinence conveyed in HIV/AIDS preventative articles in *The Lafayette*.

While it would be easy to say that this is the entire discourse of sexual behavior in relation to HIV/AIDS at Lafayette during this time, it is only a mere snippet. The Newspaper doesn't tell the whole story of Lafayette, but it sheds light on what was and wasn't going on during this time. Just because it isn't there, or that it wasn't found, doesn't mean that it didn't exist in some other type of form. The Lafayette is able to reflect some of the sentiments that Lafayette was feeling at the time and outlines the overall progression of how sexual behavior was being addressed in accordance to HIV/AIDS prevention, but there is so much left to learn about this relationship. In thinking about where the United States is today in terms of discussing sexual behavior, there is still the need to continue to be mindful of sexual behaviors that don't fit into the norm. When trying to help protect and entire community from something so deadly, one can't simply assume that the standard will be applicable to everyone, therefore consideration of various sexual behaviors is completely necessary.

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