

The San Diego Blood Sisters:
Highlighting Queer Women's Activism During the AIDS Epidemic

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Introduction:

The long hot summer of 1983 saw the beginnings of a deadly disease that devastated the queer community across the United States.¹ Many queer men had contracted or died from what was then called Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID), now known as acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). The disease overwhelmed hospitals in most major cities throughout the country and drained the available blood supply from blood banks. As hospitals ran low on blood, they turned to the communities around them and asked for donations. But who would donate to help queer men? The media raged that donating to, or even associating with, queer men would put people at risk for the unknown disease. Queer women, however, acted in response. As San Diego native Wendy Sue Beigeleisen said, "We could not sit by and watch everyone we love die and do nothing."² Starting in the summer of 1983, lasting through the 1990s, Wendy Sue, along with several other lesbian and queer women from the San Diego Democratic Club (SDDC), formed the San Diego Blood Sisters. These women inspired other lesbian and queer women's blood drives across the nation, served their community, and established queer centric directed donation accounts that built a network of unity and solidarity within queer culture.

¹ The term "queer" has become a compact alternative to lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender and emphasizes affinity and solidarity of the LGBTQ+ community. Sharon Marcus, "Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay" in *Signs*, vol. 31, no. 1, (The University of Chicago Press, Autumn 2005) Pg. 203 – 218.

² Steve Wroblewski, "Interview with Wendy Sue Biegeleisen," February 8th, 2016, Lambda Archives of San Diego: accessed January 31, 2022.

Although the Blood Sisters acted as an important and unifying voice for the queer community, history often seems to forget their actions and significance. Currently the historical scholarship about the 1980s highlights the neoconservatism and anti-queer rhetoric present within U.S. mainstream voices and governmental policy. Robert O. Self's *All in the Family* and Jeffery Bennett's *Banning Queer Blood* explain how the 1980s saw a rise in anti-queer activism spurred by a Christian-right movement that attempted to return the country to "traditional family values." Bennett highlights how policies banning blood from queer men by the FDA, isolation policies recommended by the CDC, and the overall rhetoric of the 1980s affected queer men. Largely missing, however, is how these policies affected lesbian and queer women. Additionally, the limited historiography that discusses 1980s lesbian and queer women often separate AIDS activism from that of AIDS services. Jennifer Brier's work, *Locating Lesbian and Feminist Responses to AIDS, 1982 - 1984* and *Infectious Ideas*, engages with how women sought unity during this moment of divisive and discriminatory rhetoric while positioning their activism within 1980s politics. Beth Hutchinson highlights more of this history of AIDS services in *Lesbian Blood Drives as Community-Building Activism in the 1980s* but begins to connect these ideas of services and activism.

While Brier and Hutchinson's work begin highlighting aspects of the lesbian and queer women's response to AIDS, their work leaves more room to examine the connection between cultural historical effects and the historically political nature of queer women's activism. This paper seeks to address that gap by placing the San Diego Blood Sisters at the center of the cultural and political conversation. In analyzing the Blood Sisters through Kimberlé Crenshaw's frame of intersectionality, the analytical framework for understanding how a person's social and political identities interact and combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege,

this historical discussion highlights the nuances queer women activists faced both within and outside of the queer community.³ By serving as nurses, donating blood, illegally organizing clean needle projects, and amplifying the voices of those who passed from AIDS, the San Diego Blood Sisters acted in response to the national blood shortage and discrimination against the queer community. In the process, they created a social and cultural effect which rejected the notions of “appropriate behavior” and tied the queer community together.

Beginning with discussions surrounding the 1980s, this paper opens by highlighting the context that creates the gap where Brier and Hutchinson, the Blood Sisters, and the overall paper fits into the historiography. Highlighting the realities that the queer community faced allows for the conversation to begin where the Blood Sisters could create ties within the community and challenge ideas of appropriate behavior. Focusing on the 1980s political and cultural landscape also creates the base understanding for how San Diego existed as an important intersection between queer activism and the larger conservatism of the dominant culture. Section two then turns the focus onto the Blood Sisters, who they were, and why their actions mattered. Through detailed discussions and examinations of these queer women as activists, the Blood Sisters’ actions take on both direct and indirect political and cultural meanings for the queer community that begin to connect ideas of AIDS activism and AIDS services. However, section three demonstrates, they were not alone. Queer women’s activism during the AIDS crisis existed in the media and politics across the greater United States. By tying the Blood Sisters to the larger moment of queer women’s activism, the paper thus highlights how important the actions of queer women were when asserting narratives of unity and solidarity. Through examining the overall effects and how these women challenged historical relationships of power, this paper expands on

³ Kimberlee Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” in *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6 (July 1991), pp. 1241 – 1299, esp. 1241 – 1244

the social, political, and cultural understandings of the queer community and the many forms of AIDS activism.

The Assault on The Queer Community

Characterized by Regan-era ideology, McCarthyism, and overall social conservatism, the 1980s stands out in American history as a decade where the pendulum swung far to the right. Acting as a response to the social movements of the 1970s, the social and political climate of the 1980s pushed minorities further outside the sphere of acceptability.⁴ By instituting new laws and ordinances that targeted communities of color, queer people, and women – the federal, state, and local governments across the United States created a climate of hostility ripe for continued and new forms of discrimination. For the queer community this came in two phases. First was through a wave of “traditional values” that swept across the country centering around the “idyllic” family structure rooted in Whiteness. Spurred by the Christian right, the narrative of ideal gender roles, presentations of family units, and American culture as within the home created a basis for extreme anti-black and anti-queer sentiment.⁵ Then, as the AIDS crisis unfolded, the second phase of queer discrimination expanded. Between originally ignoring the existence of AIDS to later blaming the disease solely on black people and queer men, the Regan administration created an American reality of fear and disgust against minorities infiltrating the lives of those pushed to the outskirts of society.⁶ For queer people, navigating these phases meant consistently confronting a social culture, and political structure, that fundamentally stood against their existence.

⁴ Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s*, (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2012), 1 – 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 309 – 338.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 219 – 247.

By centering around the idea of traditional family values, Regan's initial presidential campaign was as a targeted effort against the queer community. Following the social movements and strides for equality during the 1970s, Regan represented a "return to tradition" emboldening his Christian far-right base of supporters. The primary principles of this return to the traditional family clung to ideas and presentations of whiteness and adherence to a "union" between one man and one woman – where the woman is always subordinate.⁷ This structure explicitly targeted and asserted gender and sexual roles that women should play, and encapsulated race as a form of social capital as explicit presentations always excluded mixed-race and black families. By centering the conversation around this idyllic family, the conservative right was thus able to create a social and political economy that targeted anything that didn't meet their definition. As the straight and white family took center stage and most major discussions were rooted in the home, aka how "proper" Americans should exist, they pushed racial and sexual minorities further to the outer rims of society.

As the first phase of discrimination created the grounds for anti-queer rhetoric, since queer people existed in opposition to the ideal family, the ability for more blatant discrimination against the queer community took root as the AIDS crises unfolded. During the early 1980s, the Regan administration initially ignored AIDS and its effects in major cities, but as cases began to garner national attention responding was no longer optional. Because Black and queer communities were already seen as the cultural enemy it was easy for the systems of power to place blame on these groups.⁸ In many respects though, the experiences of queer Black men were hyper stigmatized as they experienced pressure from both the dominant racialized American

⁷ Ibid., 75, 103, 309.

⁸ Cathy J. Cohen, "Contested Membership: Black Gay Identities and the Politics of AIDS," in *Queer Theory/Sociology*, edited by Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996) 362 – 363.

culture and anti-queer conservatism. Additionally, though, the queer community was not immune to the American racialized culture. Even within the community, queer Black men were demonized for being sexual and being Black.⁹ The reality existed that AIDS effected the United States in mass bouts of conservative hysteria, that replicated itself within the queer community, painting Black, queer black, and other queer men as dangerous and disease-ridden whose bodies and sexuality required policing. This hysteria then overwhelmed hospitals as the blood supply, and who could access it, took on greater political relevance.

Fueled by a lack of understanding the disease, the American racial and anti-queer culture reflected conservative hysteria more than dangers posed by the AIDS itself. Extending the sentiment reflected through the “traditional family values” campaign, the conservative Regan era government allowed bans on queer men’s blood, forced queer men’s isolation into AIDS wards in every major hospital, and furthered discriminatory policies of directed blood donations.¹⁰ In early 1983, following the establishment of AIDS wards, the ban on Black and queer men’s blood by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) began. To administer the ban men had to fill out questionnaires to donate blood. Major questions on these questionnaires included “Have you had sexual contact with another man, even once, since 1977?”¹¹ These kinds of questions effectively forced queer men to take on a further marginalized reality, as the nation’s media and government raged that “being American” meant helping to combat the blood shortage.¹² Interestingly, however, the idea of combatting the blood shortage was not to save the queer men affected by the disease but rather to help other patients in the hospitals that needed blood transfusions during

⁹ Ibid., 372 – 382.

¹⁰ Jeffery Bennett, *Banning Queer Blood: Rhetorics of Citizenship, Contagion, and Resistance*, (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2009), 55 – 60.

¹¹ American Association of Blood Banks, News Briefs, “10th Anniversary of National Blood Policy Celebrated: AIDS UPDATE.” Vol. 6, no. 9, September 1983. Pp 1 and 3, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, Los Angeles, CA: accessed February 5, 2022.

¹² Bennett, *Banning Queer Blood*, 1 – 27.

the national blood shortages.¹³ In these responses to the AIDS epidemic, federal, state, and local governments – along with private blood banks – either created or furthered existing directed blood donation accounts, where donors could choose who received their blood rather than maintaining “community pots” that existed prior to the AIDS crisis.¹⁴ These policies further marginalized Black peoples, queer Black men, and other queer men by framing them as un-American, since they could not donate blood, and created additional avenues for discrimination through the directed donation accounts.

While queer women were not directly affected by HIV/AIDS in the same way or to the same degree that queer men were, they, too, experienced discrimination from the deep conservatism and homophobia of the Reagan era. The cultural and legal contexts of the Reagan era limited the existence of anything outside of a strict white-heterosexual family and a new donor class as directed donation accounts swept across the nation. This reality of American cultural life situated all women, and especially queer women, as sexless subordinates that returned to the cult of domesticity.¹⁵ The return to the cult of domesticity, espoused by the Evangelical right Reagan emboldened, reinforced an idea of “appropriate behavior” for women that sought to limit the gains made in the 1970s. These ideas placed greater cultural expectations onto queer women as the ideas were centered around subordination to men. Queer women thus faced pressures from an intersectional perspective as their bodies became the site of political and cultural debate from additional angles.

The San Diego Blood Sisters

¹³ Ibid., 83 – 110.

¹⁴ Lorry Rose, “Blood Banking Organizations Reaffirm Directed Donation Recommendations,” in *American Association of Blood Banks, News Release*, media release, September 2, 1983, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries. Los Angeles, CA: accessed February 5, 2022.

¹⁵ Self, *All in the Family*, 309.

In July of 1983, months into the AIDS crisis, lesbian and queer women from the SDDC established and organized the first ever Blood Sisters' Blood Drive. Made up of mostly lesbian and queer women, these events became a major cultural assertion of queer resistance and power against the dominant heteronormative power structures. They not only worked against ideas of separation between queer men and queer women but also asserted power in their bodies. These blood drives built on and expanded a long wave of lesbian and queer women's community activism. They created important and lasting cultural ties between different groups within the overall queer community. As the Blood Sisters engaged in these actions commonly associated with AIDS services, the blood drives they organized also become a force of AIDS activism, often treated separately in the historical literature. However, showcasing the activism asserted by the Blood Sisters also highlights the cultural ties lesbian and queer women created through providing services to help dampen the effects of AIDS.

From a long and complicated history between moments of acceptance for local queer icons to moments of extreme draconian regulation, the city of San Diego was a tumultuous ground for both the far-right conservatism and queer resistance in the 1980s.¹⁶ Due in part to the well-known history of homosexuality within post-war military – and San Diego's large military presence – it becomes clear why this Southern Californian city was home to such a large and vibrant queer community.¹⁷ The large numbers of men returning to San Diego from deployment after having explored their sexuality abroad often found themselves straddled between the hetero and queer worlds. And as women – some of them queer – worked to fill the

¹⁶ Lillian Faderman, "LGBTQ in San Diego: A History of Persecution, Battles, and Triumphs," in *The Journal of San Diego History*, vol. 65, no. 1 (Spring 2019), <https://sandieghistory.org/journal/2019/july/lgbtq-in-san-diego-a-history-of-persecution-battles-and-triumphs/>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, <https://sandieghistory.org/journal/2019/july/lgbtq-in-san-diego-a-history-of-persecution-battles-and-triumphs/>.

gap of labor in factories, offices, and more began building closer bonds with one another – they too found themselves between worlds. These growing complexities allowed for San Diego to exist as a dramatic example of the pressure forming throughout the country between the growing queer communities and the dominant heteronormative culture. Activism based within the San Diego queer community is well documented from the late 1960s throughout the 1970s rights movements, and by the 1980s tensions in San Diego ran high.¹⁸ Grounding this discussion in a city where the queer community consistently confronted and asserted their being against the conservatism also present within the established military complex, shows the basis for why and how these lesbian and queer women got involved. From consistently challenging the dominant narratives there is no wonder how these San Diegan women became the Blood Sisters.

Organizing the first Blood Sisters' blood drive in 1983 marked an important step towards the larger goals of unity and solidarity in attempting to keep queer men alive through the AIDS crisis. The women of the San Diego Democratic Club (SDDC) organized the blood drive at their summer retreat, taking detailed notes so that groups around the country might replicate their success. Establishing four principles for the blood drives, the Blood Sisters detailed their goals and how to reach all of them. First was to establish directed donation accounts for the queer community, and their supportive family members. Second, the drive was to encourage lesbian and queer women to not only help prevent more AIDS deaths, but to also subvert the dominant straight establishment of directed donations. Third was that no supporter of the queer community was to be turned away, as the blood being collected was too important to the larger goal. And lastly, the actions taken needed to be publicized – not only through queer-centric news outlets but also on what they referred to as the, “straight” media (aka the mainstream heterosexual media

¹⁸ Ibid., <https://sandieghistory.org/journal/2019/july/lgbtq-in-san-diego-a-history-of-persecution-battles-and-triumphs/>.

outlets).¹⁹ These women were acutely aware of the importance of their actions and took great strides in publicizing them as much as possible.

By establishing the four principles of directed donations, subverting the establishment, allowing allies and supporters to donate, and publicizing the events as much as possible, the Sisters made the blood drives a huge success. The first drive had over 200 participants alone and received media attention from both queer and “straight” outlets.²⁰ Because of the success of this first event, the Blood Sisters blood drives spread throughout Southern California, and later across the United States. Just six months after the first drive in San Diego the Long Beach Lambda Democratic Club (LBLDC) held their first drive in December of 1983.²¹ It was here, along with Blood Sister blood drives in Los Angeles, where other members of queer-centric advocacy groups got involved. Flyers from these events mentioned how large they had become, bringing lesbian and queer women from across the country to the Southern California area. One of these participants was Ginny Apuzzo, the director of the National Gay Task Force (NGTF).²² Apuzzo, a prominent 1980s American lesbian activist, then brought the idea further across the country holding blood drives organized by the NGTF in Chicago, New York, and Boston in 1984. As *The Advocate*, one of the leading and longest running queer magazines in United States history, reported in September of 1984, the San Diego Blood Sisters idea had caught on and rapidly spread throughout the lesbian and queer women’s community.²³ Thus, this mobilization and diffusion of the drives elevated the cultural and political impact of the Blood Sisters as an

¹⁹ San Diego Democratic Club’s Women’s Caucus, *How to Organize a “Blood Sister’s” Blood Fund & Drive*, pages 1-3, meeting notes, July 16, 1983, L2016.07, Lambda Archives of San Diego: accessed March 22, 2022.

²⁰ Nathan Fain, “HEALTH: BLOOD SISTERS IDEA CATCHES ON” in *The Advocate*, Los Angeles, issue 402, September 4, 1984, 18.

²¹ Lesbian Central of GLCSC and The Long Beach Lambda Democratic Club, *Blood Sister Blood Drive*, print flyer, December 17, 1983, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries. Los Angeles, CA: accessed February 5, 2022.

²² *Ibid.*, Accessed: February 5th, 2022.

²³ Fain, “HEALTH: BLOOD SISTERS IDEA CATCHES ON,” 18 – 19.

example of lesbian and queer women's subversion of national regulations that limited queer people's access to blood during the AIDS crisis.

The Blood Sisters didn't stop there. By 1987, most of the lesbian and queer women activists who organized the first San Diego blood drive helped to organize within the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) in San Diego. As the AIDS crisis and panic continued throughout the United States, additional federal restrictions came with harsher crack downs on needle sharing, bathhouses, and funding for AIDS medication. ACT-UP San Diego acted in response to these attacks each time as they came. First in 1984, after the CDC identified needle sharing as a high-risk factor and contributor for AIDS transmissions – the federal and state governments implemented new penal codes that classified the possession of a needle without a prescription as a misdemeanor offense.²⁴ Knowing that these policies targeted at-risk populations, and specifically queer people, ACT-UP stepped in to organize illegal clean needle exchanges. Every Saturday members of ACT-UP brought clean needles to swap with used ones at local homeless shelters including the Neil Good Day Center.²⁵ Every member knew they could find themselves charged and arrested but acted nonetheless in order to help prevent the continued transmission.

The fact that ACT-UP did not limit the help provided to just the queer community allowed space for the federal and state governments to attempt to sow dissent within the organization much like they had in the larger queer community. Essentially by forcing two issues at once, the governments often attempted to split the organization's members and support. Because ACT-UP San Diego's actions directly confronted the legal system as they protested

²⁴ H.G. Reza, "AIDS Activists Will Continue Swapping Old Needles for New and Defying Police," in *Los Angeles Times*, newspaper, February 19, 1992. Los Angeles Times Archives: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-02-19-me-2324-story.html>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-02-19-me-2324-story.html>.

policies, showed up for hearings, and continued the illegal clean needle exchanges, they were seen as a threat. The hearings in 1988, however, show a moment when the local government utilized its power in an attempt to silence the organization by holding votes for the measures regarding funding and distribution for AZT (the only drug at the time helping to stall the effects of AIDS) on the same day that the California State government held hearings on zoning ordinances for bathhouses.²⁶ Having these measures up for a vote on the same day meant that ACT-UP San Diego had to choose which protests, events, and hearings to attend. Thus, they had to decide between their queer liberatory aspirations or their rights to medical care. While in the end, ACT-UP San Diego chose to attend the local hearings for AZT – the choice was no doubt difficult and show how the federal, state, and local governments drove additional wedges within the community.

Although ACT-UP did not start in San Diego, the San Diego chapter acted as an extension of the Blood Sisters as many Blood Sisters carried their community organizing and work into ACT-UP. By joining ACT-UP the Blood Sisters subverted additional aspects of the political establishment and elevated their actions as they organized other projects to highlight queer men’s voices. With several prominent leaders of the Blood Sisters blood drives, including Wendy Sue Beigeleisen, serving as participants and leaders within this new organization, their presence cannot go overlooked. These women acted as committee chairs, took photos of events, handed out clean needles, and overall helped to organize the San Diego branch of the largest and most visible queer-led AIDS activist group in the United States. Highlighting the Blood Sisters’ involvement in ACT-UP thus clarifies their image as community activists and organizers working to connect the queer community, and fight against oppression.

²⁶ The Executive Committee of ACT-UP San Diego, “ACT-UP San Diego, Public Services & Safety Committee, Wednesday, March 2, 1988,” L2007.07, Lambda Archives of San Diego: accessed March 22, 2022.

Although the Blood Sisters are best known for their work with the blood drives and ACT-UP San Diego, their presence in hospitals as nurses and attendants also holds significance as queer men continued to experience poor treatment from hospitals and the larger American culture. By the mid-1980s, the country's public sentiment towards the queer community, and specifically queer men, had grown exponentially worse – including in Southern California. On December 19th 1985, the *Los Angeles Times Poll* conducted over ten surveys measuring the public support for different governmental actions. The results were published under a title - “Tough New Government Action on AIDS Backed” - ²⁷ that reveals much about the assumptions built into these surveys. Included in these surveys were questions that attacked and questioned AIDS victims humanity, sexuality, and their basic rights. Questions ranged from “Require AIDS test of Job Seekers” to “Bar AIDS Patients from Having Sex,” “Withholding U.S. Funds Unless Bathhouses Close,” and “Require ID Cards for Potential AIDS Victims.” Embedded within these survey measures are stereotypes of queer people as they survey connects bathhouses with AIDS and brands those who visit queer-centric locations as “potential AIDS victims.” Additionally, as these measures paint a legal question poised against queer people's rights disingenuous labels like “victims” in this survey hints at a much deeper and more troubling aspect of American life, one that takes away rights in the name of protection. While these questions had varying degrees of support, they all fared favorably with over 50 percent of participants agreeing with the actions.²⁸ These questions and their favorability reveal the anxieties within the overall American culture as they respond to the AIDS crisis out of fear, especially within the frame of sexuality.

²⁷ John Balazar, “Tough New Government Action on AIDS Backed,” in *The Los Angeles Times Poll*, news release, December 19, 1985, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries. Los Angeles, CA: accessed February 5, 2022.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, Los Angeles, CA: accessed February 5, 2022.

On the surface one could say that these were policy decisions and measures that applied to everyone in society. But by taking a closer look at the language and applications it is clear they blatantly targeted queer people and other vulnerable minorities. As mentioned earlier, queer people and Black people were the primary targets of the traditional family values campaign, and other far right conservative campaigns, and these 1985 polls encapsulate that moment in history. The inclusion of proposals surrounding both citizenship and ID cards raises the question of who is American and why. This question became central as the other measures explicitly focus on queer people, such as targeting bathhouses, continuing the ban on queer blood, and asking responders if they support political candidates more when they espouse support for strict “anti-homosexual” laws.²⁹ By focusing primarily on sexuality as the basis for citizenship - with the IDs, employment - with requiring tests for job seekers, and attempting to explicitly limit acts of sex: these questions reveal the larger American cultural anxieties regarding homosexuality that permeated every aspect of life. So, when these anxieties also started appearing in Center for Disease Control (CDC) published pamphlets and guidelines by 1987, just 4 years after the first Blood Sisters’ blood drive and first established AIDS ward, it seemed like a natural step.³⁰

Because the Blood Sisters ignored these guidelines established by the CDC since their inception, the Sisters represent an additional layer of cultural complexity as they not only worked against the directed donation laws but also subverted the larger American culture and treatment of queer men. Specifically, as the Blood Sisters served as nurses and bedside companions for AIDS patients, they ignored every cultural fear espoused by their straight counterparts. Wendy Sue mentions this in her interview saying, “I would go in there [to the AIDS wards] and pull off

²⁹ Ibid., Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, Los Angeles, CA: accessed February 5, 2022.

³⁰ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “HIV and AIDS Timeline,” in the National Prevention Information Network, updated January 26, 2022, <https://npin.cdc.gov/pages/hiv-and-aids-timeline>.

my mask, hold my friend’s hand, and even one time kissed him on the mouth,” as she recounts the many times she sat with her best friend Frankie during his final days.³¹ As she continues, Wendy Sue describes the horror and shock the heterosexual nurses showed towards her actions, but goes on to say, “it was so important for them [AIDS patients] to feel humanity again, to feel someone’s touch, and to know they’re not alone...it didn’t matter to me if I didn’t know that much about the disease, I just knew I didn’t have it and he wasn’t going to give it to me.”³²

As Wendy Sue’s words show, the policies enacted by the FDA, CDC, and federal and state governments – along with their widespread public support – hurt the queer community in unimaginable ways as they removed the human contact, and thus humanity, queer men experienced. Queer women like Wendy Sue and the countless other Blood Sisters returned some of that humanity to their “brothers” and friends. As Wendy Sue explains, sitting next to their friends, laughing with them as they were in the hospital, and sometimes simply being the only person there when they passed; these were the most important actions they could take in the fight against AIDS.³³ Thus, the Blood Sisters held the community together, one hand at a time.

Not a Moment but a Movement

While it is true that the Blood Sisters found their start working against the directed donation accounts because of the ban on queer men’s blood, and the national blood shortage, their movement was a much larger force simultaneously working against culture and politics. The Blood Sisters’ actions upset heteronormative ideology behind the divisions within queer subcultures by asserting their physical being against the state. As examined earlier the ban on

³¹ Wroblewski, “Interview with Wendy Sue Biegeleisen,” February 8th, 2016, Lambda Archives of San Diego: accessed January 31, 2022.

³² Ibid., Lambda Archives of San Diego: accessed January 31, 2022.

³³ Ibid., Lambda Archives of San Diego: accessed January 31, 2022.

queer men's blood seemed to act as a galvanizing force for the SDDC to act and begin the blood drives. At a time when queerness had become synonymous with death, sickness, and disease in the broader American cultural imagination, these women challenged that idea when asserting their bodies as sexual and their blood as a powerful force to save lives. Turning here and looking at how these discriminatory policies, ideas, and queer rejections effected the body and the power the body holds not only shows the cultural effects the Blood Sisters asserted as they held the community together, but also the effects on the larger queer community in terms of the idea of the "liberated body" from the 1970s movements. By utilizing their bodies and blood as a force to unify the community against the vitriol and hate, the Blood Sisters represent how queer women continued to push for the liberation of the body rejecting the stigmatization of queer blood, intimacy, and humanity.

The San Diego Blood Sisters were just one example of queer solidarity that worked against dominant narratives, but earlier examples of queer women in the news showcase that their actions existed within the context of a larger movement for unity. Women as early as 1980, called for the end of "straight" oppression imagining a response to AIDS that would reinvigorate queer people in a struggle against more systemic oppression.³⁴ One of them, Cindy Patton, along with several other queer women who worked at *Gay Community News* (GCN), talked openly about how oppressive narratives worked against the community at large, and not just against queer men.³⁵ Moreover, these women rejected the notion that queer liberation meant an absence of sex and sexuality. Locating this response within the context of dominant heteronormative narratives that ignored queer women's sexuality by characterizing them "as a model of

³⁴ Jennifer Brier, "Locating Lesbian and Feminist Responses to AIDS, 1982 – 1984," in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 1/2, *The Sexual Body* (Spring – Summer, 2007), 235 – 237.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 243 – 245.

monogamy,” lesbian and queer women, like Patton, rejected conformity and asserted their sexuality.³⁶

Although much of the ideology placed on queer women as sexless models of monogamy came from the dominant and straight American culture, it cannot be ignored that the pressure also came from within the queer community. As Brier explores in her book *Infectious Ideas*, the dominant cultural response to AIDS, and the proposed need to stop having sex from Larry Kramer (a prominent queer writer for the New York *Native* queer magazine), seeped its way into the queer community, queer narratives, and queer media outlets.³⁷ Kramer’s ideas though relied heavily on the comparisons to queer women, who he and other popular writers portrayed as sexless and monogamous. Writers like Kramer also showcase the additional intersectional pressures that queer women faced from within their own community. However, prominent lesbian voices and writers from the GCN, like Patton, show us their rejections of the intersectional pressure from both the dominant heterosexual culture and the growing sentiment within the queer community. By working with other lesbian writers, and gay men, who rejected these pressures, the GCN stood against the tide and reasserted the cultural and political power within the queer body during the AIDS crisis. Essentially, because they re-adopted the ideology that sex and sexuality hold power against the narratives placed on their bodies, they reimagined the queer body as subversive and powerful. Combining this reimagined power with the healing and connections of unity the Blood Sisters produced from their blood, the body becomes a more central piece to the overall liberatory narrative. But they are more than just a body asserting their power, they are lesbian and queer women’s bodies, identities, and subversions that pave this new

³⁶ Ibid., 246 – 247.

³⁷ Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 12 – 13.

wave of queer liberation. Thus, the GCN's actions in reasserting their sexual freedom, and returning to gay liberatory narratives of the 1970s highlights the additional ways queer women existed as the driving force for continued queer liberation during the AIDS crisis.

The actions from both the women of the GCN and the San Diego Blood Sisters not only act as the driving force for queer liberation, and liberation of sexuality and the body, connecting their histories also shows the importance of connecting ideas of AIDS activism with AIDS services. In this sense, even though donating blood is commonly associated with AIDS services, the actions the Blood Sisters took also exist as part of the AIDS cultural activism espoused by women like Patton and the GCN. As historians such as Hutchinson highlight the former while Brier highlights the latter, connecting these ideas and showcasing how the Sisters straddled both ideas, asserts the link that services are a form of, and build off, activist principles. As the Blood Sisters saw their actions as activism, and as argued – reclaimed their bodies in true activist fashion, the services provided both from the blood drives and within ACT-UP San Diego are community activism at work to build community solidarity. This link between activism and services also places the Sisters in the greater historical context of lesbian and queer women's activism of the 1980s that pushed the community to unify that created the vehicle for the queer liberatory narratives to thrive.

As the Blood Sisters and women of the GCN asserted these narratives of unity and sexual freedom during the AIDS crisis, they embodied the larger intersectional rejection of conformity to the heteronormative narratives of both gender and sexuality. Locating these lesbian and queer women's responses in a moment of extreme discrimination against the queer community demonstrates that queer women acted deliberately to upset gender norms that characterized them as sexless, placed restrictions on their bodies, and ignored their history. By shining the light on

queer women's actions and voices, a greater understanding of how and why they acted in unity and solidarity lends to a more holistic understanding of the queer liberatory movement of the 1980s.

Conclusion

By exploring and highlighting queer women's activism during the AIDS crisis, the historical conversation expands to discuss the cultural and political effects of unity and solidarity. By opening the discussion with contextualization of the culture and politics of the 1980s, the traditional family values campaign and far-right conservatism, a greater understanding of the discrimination that mobilized these queer women's movements takes place. Specifically highlighting the actions of the San Diego Blood Sisters, the discussion moves to show how these women pushed against the cultural and political establishment on a local level. With the diffusion of the Blood Sisters' ideas throughout Southern California, and then to the National stage in Chicago, New York, and Boston – the blood drives took on a prominent connective meaning for the entire queer community across the country. The cultural power these drives represented as they challenged direct laws and ordinances against queer men, cannot go understated. As the Blood Sisters continued to organize within the community and got involved in ACT-UP San Diego, they asserted their presence within the queer community as both queer and as women. Their direct actions shifted the balance of power on both the local and national scales – as the Sisters did not act alone. Queer women's activism during the AIDS crisis took place in the media, politics, protests, hospitals, and more across the greater United States. By responding in these ways, queer women's bodies and blood became the site of resistance against to the crisis and hate the dominant culture placed on the queer community while asserting unity and solidarity. By doing so, these women sewed the queer community together forming a more

unified front in the campaign against the discrimination imposed by the larger heteronormative society and government. Although much of history regarding the AIDS crisis seldom mentions the queer women of the time, highlighting them here reengages with the everyday lives of an expanded queer community.

Placing the Blood Sisters at the center of political and cultural intersections in AIDS activism and AIDS services allows for a greater understanding of how the queer movement returned to their liberatory roots and reclaimed the power in their blood and bodies. By challenging the narratives placed on their body, these women challenged the gender-normativity of the traditional family values, but also reminded the community of our power and humanity, and reasserted that our sexuality does not limit us. Their actions grounded the community in the liberation of the body and highlights how important the actions of queer women are when asserting a narrative of unity and solidarity. The laws, regulations, deaths, and AIDS crisis of the 1980s, changed the course of history for the entire community, not just for queer men, and in the end created the framework for our present-day queer community.

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