A man and his dog. The man, Randy Shilts, follows in the grand old tradition of muckrakers and whistle blowers.

A fighter. Persistent. And now a celebrity. The dog, Dash. His steadfast friend through it all.

Ten years ago Randy Shilts hit bottom. He lost one job in journalism, and nobody would give him another because he was gay. Today the thirty-seven-year-old author of And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic is one of the most celebrated journalists in the country.

Shilts' first brush with San Francisco media came in 1975. Nearing graduation from the University of Oregon, he came here to compete in a national writing championship sponsored by the Hearst Foundation. He placed second, only to have the award snatched away when the Hearst folks discovered he was gay. Instead of returning to the closet, he knocked on new doors—and
that led to stints doing TV work for KTVU in Oakland and KQED's old *Newsroom* show.

When KQED canceled its evening news program in 1980, Shilts remembers "nobody would give me a job—it seemed I'd made a grievous error about being openly gay." Thinking it might be his last piece of journalism, he wrote *The Mayor of Castro Street*, the definitive book about Harvey Milk, the assassinated gay San Francisco supervisor. After the book's publication, two things happened. The San Francisco Chronicle hired Shilts as a general-assignment reporter, and stories began to surface about a mysterious malaise afflicting the homosexual community, something cryptically called "gay cancer."

What was this phenomenon and what could be done about it? Shilts was determined to get some answers and report them. From the start he believed that AIDS was nine parts politics and one part medicine. That called for investigative reporting, which no one else was doing on the subject. Shilts not only challenged government officials, he dared to challenge doctors and scientists.

Shilts made many enemies during this period—he even incurred the wrath of the gay press and many in the gay community when he linked the transmission of the virus to the then-thriving bathhouse scene. Shilts was vilified for his attention to the perils of bathhouse sex.

The ostracism and savage attacks he suffered made his personal life difficult. He found himself increasingly turning to alcohol and marijuana for solace, but what once brought chemical comfort quickly led to despair. He realized he was an alcoholic. That realization was the first step in a long process of recovery.

Recovery from addiction helped give him the courage to begin work on the book that was to alter the way the world thinks about the AIDS epidemic—and dramatically alter Shilts' life as well.

*And the Band Played On* came out in 1987. In it, Shilts blamed the spread of AIDS on politicians, health officials, the federal government, and the news media. Almost immediately, the book hit the best-seller list. And Shilts hit the talk-show circuit, with appearances on all the major networks. The book received rave reviews and nominations for a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics Circle Award. Shilts got a Book-of-the-Month-Club contract, a miniseries deal with NBC, and book tours on three continents.

What he didn't get was what he wanted most—fundamental changes in the government's and media's handling of AIDS. Instead he continued to see the same kinds of mistakes being made over and over again—and more and more friends dying.

"I had written a book to change the world, and here I was on talk shows throughout America answering questions about mosquitoes and gay waiters," Shilts lamented in a feature story he wrote for the March 1989 issue of *Esquire*. "Never before have I succeeded so well; never before have I failed so miserably."

But Shilts hasn't given up hope, and he hasn't stopped doing what is arguably the best reporting on AIDS.

San Francisco Focus sent contributing editor Ken Kelley to interview Shilts. Here's his report:

"When I showed up at Shilts' apartment, I got a big greeting from his best friend, Dash, his golden retriever. Named after Dashiell Hammett, Dash likes to slobber, and he's convinced your lap is his doghouse.

"Randy is not quite as friendly but he certainly makes a visitor feel right at home. The first thing I notice is the suspenders. These days he never shows up for a photo shoot..."

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**Randy Shilts came of age in the post-Stonewall era. He's shown above at his high school prom; as a Bay Area TV reporter, celebrating the defeat of Proposition 6 with Harvey Milk, San Francisco's first gay supervisor; and interviewing anti-gay California State Assemblyman John Briggs.**

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Shilts regards his reporting at the Chronicle as his major obligation—the sign of a true reporter. And he still does his own dishes. And he still likes to talk a lot. Here goes':

**SF Focus: The San Francisco AIDS Foundation made a dramatic turnaround in April. After years of being neutral, it reversed its stand and came out in support of antibody testing. Do you welcome the change?**

**Randy Shilts:** Absolutely. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 94]
It’s just a shame that it comes so late. The stance the foundation had until the change was insane. Its old ad said, “Here are four reasons to be tested and four reasons not to be tested.” That implied that there are as many reasons not to be tested as there are to be tested. And that’s simply not true, especially for high-risk groups.

**SF Focus:** The AIDS Foundation wasn’t alone. Other large groups, such as Gay Men’s Health Crisis in New York and AIDS Action in Boston, are still neutral.

**Shilts:** I’ll give credit where it’s due: the AIDS Foundation is the first major AIDS group in the country to take a pro-testing stand. I just wonder why it took so long. You hope groups like this will take a leadership role instead of trailing the community.

**SF Focus:** And what of the others? Are they playing politics instead of just focusing on testing as a medical issue?

**Shilts:** Exactly. People are afraid of discrimination, and that is a legitimate concern. But it should not win out over the medical realities. Unfortunately, that’s what we’ve seen all through the years — political concerns triumphing over the public health.

Another example is the actions of Dr. Mervyn Silverman, former director of the San Francisco Health Department. He didn’t close the bathhouses when he should have because he didn’t want to make a decision that would make anybody mad.

What’s so tragic about his stance is that studies now show that at least a third of the gay men who were infected with this virus were infected between late ’83 and late ’84. In that period a huge proportion of gay men were still going to the bathhouses. And I’m absolutely convinced that a lot of those infections could have been entirely avoided if those bathhouses had been shut down.

People say that San Francisco is this great example of how to respond to the AIDS epidemic. Clearly, we provide services for people who are sick. But in terms of our education, well, we’ve got a city where 55 percent of the gay men are infected with the virus. If that’s an example of success, I would despair to conceive of failure. What we needed was bold, decisive action — instead we got Silverman playing politics. It’s time for health and medical issues to take precedence.

**SF Focus:** But what about the important issues of confidentiality and discrimination? How do you address them?

**Shilts:** First of all I think those concerns need to be put in perspective. Are you going to be alive to even worry about having your name put on a list? Are you going to be alive to have a job to lose? And I think by not being tested, people are putting their lives on the line in a very immediate and short-term way. Certainly there have been many instances of egregious discrimination, but it’s more the exception than the rule.

Besides, I don’t believe fear of discrimination is what keeps people from getting tested. Finding out you’re positive is the most horrifying, terrifying piece of information you can get. People don’t want to go through that.

**SF Focus:** People don’t want to take the test because they look on a positive finding as a death sentence. Can taking the test help to save your life?

**Shilts:** The clinical management of this disease has progressed so dramatically in the past two years that when you find out you’re HIV positive, it’s no longer a matter of sitting around and waiting to die. There are interventions that will protect your health. The most dramatic are those that you can use to prevent getting pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, which is the major killer of people who get AIDS.

There are different treatments. The one that’s gotten the publicity lately is an aerosolized pentamidine, an antibiotic in a mist form. It’s the drug they normally use to treat pneumocystis once you get it, but they’ve found that if you inhale this mist before you get pneumocystis, it acts as a preventive. Even if your immune system crashes and you don’t have enough T cells, which are the markers they use to monitor the status of your immune system, you just don’t get pneumocystis.

At one point doctors were saying the relapse rate of pneumocystis was 80 percent in a year. I know one doctor who had three hundred patients who had all had pneumocystis once. Within eleven months, 60 to 70 percent of those patients typically would have had
a relapse. He gives them aerosolized pentamidine. Last year he had one relapse in three hundred patients. There’s just no excuse to get pneumocystis pneumonia anymore. And it’s the kind of disease that most people with AIDS get first.

**SF Focus:** All that sounds like a stop-gap measure. Can people expect to live close to normal lives?

**Shilts:** At this point, researchers and people I’ve talked to in both government and the pharmaceutical industry are extremely optimistic that within three or four years we’re going to be seeing profound life-extending treatments that can turn AIDS into something like diabetes. There will still be something wrong with you, but it can be managed so that it doesn’t kill you.

"WHEN YOU FIND OUT YOU’RE HIV POSITIVE, IT’S NO LONGER A MATTER OF SITTING AROUND AND WAITING TO DIE."

You could live another twenty years. It’s very rare today to hear an expert say that everybody who is HIV positive is going to die.

**SF Focus:** Have you been tested?

**Shilts:** Twice. But the only people who really have the right to know my antibody status are the people I’m going to bed with.

**SF Focus:** Given all you’ve just said, I wonder, do you support mandatory testing?

**Shilts:** No. Theoretically mandatory testing means forcing everybody to take a test, and I don’t know how you would possibly do that. I’m talking about voluntary, confidential testing.

**SF Focus:** You wouldn’t favor mandatory testing in any situation?

**Shilts:** Look, none of this stuff is totally black and white. I think the knee-jerk liberal reaction is to say that all mandatory testing is bad. On the whole, that’s probably true. But there are situations where you should have mandatory testing. Take our prisons. The plain fact is that rape exists in prison. And if you get some eighteen-year-old guy who’s being sent up for a year on auto theft, part of his sentence should not include getting infected with the AIDS virus.

There are also good reasons why you’d test everybody in the military, especially if you are sending troops overseas. In the Philippines, for example, virtually all the early cases of HIV infection were prostitutes who were having sex with American servicemen. We don’t want part of our foreign aid package to include the AIDS virus, because this could have disastrous effects in terms of our relationships with other countries.

But once somebody tests positive, what do you do? Under the current system, if someone is signing up to go in the military, he’s kicked out. He gets no counseling. They just tell him he’s not allowed in, and then he has to fend for himself. And I’ve talked to people in the Bronx in the lower socio-economic neighborhoods where this is likely to happen, and it wrecks people’s lives. If you’re going to do testing in that situation—and I can see the policy need—you’ve still got to balance it out. You have to treat people humanely.

**SF Focus:** You’ve said that the critical time for stopping the spread of AIDS among gay men was the early eighties, the bathhouse period. Now we’re seeing the spread among intravenous drug users in places like the Bronx. Is right now the critical time in minority communities?

**Shilts:** Definitely. I told some black journalists that one of them should write the black community’s version of my book, *And the Band Played On*—and write it now, because the whole story is being repeated there. It’s horrible.

Most of the black political leaders also tend to be Protestant ministers, so you’ve got a leadership that is politically liberal but very socially conservative. And for the most part they’ve always been homophobes. Even in San Francisco, where some of the black political leaders have made political alliances of convenience with the gay community, most of them have no understanding of what the gay issue is all about, and most of them I’ve talked to
are still fundamentally homophobic.

What's worse is what's happening in the black community back East. You've got some people advocating needle exchanges [trading used syringes for sterile ones so that IV drug users don't share infected needles], but the most vehement opponents of exchanges are black community leaders. It's an internal classism: the middle and upper class don't give a whit about all those bad junkies dying out. The inability of the black community to deal with AIDS, whether it's from needles or sexual activity, is the real problem.

**SF Focus:** Are you saying that no one in the black community is working on AIDS?

**Shilts:** Cecil Williams is an exception. There are others. But so many here are amazingly behind the times in terms of gay issues. So here, they've got their black choir directors dying off, but they won't acknowledge gay men.

And no matter what we say about the spread of AIDS as an intravenous-drug issue in the community, the black leaders don't want to get near it because of the earlier links with AIDS as a gay issue.

It's not unlike the denial we had among gay political leaders five years ago. The political leaders don't want to get near it, but you need the political leaders if you're going to mobilize the governmental response and get the kind of cash you need to community agencies to cope with the problem.

**SF Focus:** The gay community really did mobilize in the face of the AIDS crisis. Who's going to do that for the minority community?

**Shilts:** I don't think anybody is going to do as good a job as the gay community. In the black and Hispanic communities, which tend to be poor,
treatment on demand.

We've seen what happens if you don't do anything. You can see it in those babies born with AIDS as they lie emaciated in their cribs. You see it on the streets of Puerto Rico, where people are dying in the street because there are so many IV drug users with AIDS down there. We know exactly what's going to happen. There are no mysteries. And we've got the chance to do something.

**SF Focus:** We know the immediate effects of the crisis, but do we know what the long-term impact of AIDS will be? Some people think it may bankrupt the American health-care system.

**Shilts:** AIDS is not enough to bankrupt the system. Even at its worst in the mid-nineties, it's calculated that it will consume only about 6 percent of medical costs. It's going to be a horrible burden on a handful of cities—most notably San Francisco—because we'll have such a concentration of cases. I don't think it's going to bankrupt the system. But AIDS is acting like a dye that we're injecting into the system, and it's showing all of the cracks and weaknesses in the system.

I don't think there's any aspect it illustrates more dramatically than the insanity of how this country finances health care. It's absolutely crazy. And what we're seeing with AIDS is successful young professionals have to spend down—consciously wipe out their resources—and go into poverty in order to qualify for the Medicaid program. The only way they can pay their huge medical bills is to be on public assistance. All working Americans who are uninsured or underinsured find themselves faced with that reality. And it's because of the barbaric way we have of financing health care.

**SF Focus:** What kind of changes will result from the AIDS crisis?

**Shilts:** We're going to come out of this epidemic with some form of national health insurance. At the very least. Clearly, it would have happened without AIDS, because it's so stupid the way we do it now. But I think this is going to accelerate it. As far as breakthroughs, you go to these AIDS conferences and you realize that the information coming out of AIDS research has been so rapid and so voluminous that the medical world has not even begun to absorb the quantum leaps that we've already made in understanding how our body fights disease.

**SF Focus:** So you think there will ultimately be beneficial effects?

**Shilts:** Absolutely. Medicine is never going to be the same. Every American who gets anything from a common cold to cancer is going to benefit profoundly within the next decade from the advances coming out of AIDS research. It's just like when we put a man on the moon and we ended up with Teflon and thousands of other products. Because we were putting so much money into such a concerted effort, I think we'll see similar things coming out of the epidemic as well. I don't think it's worth the price. I'd rather have a few more of my friends.

**SF Focus:** How would you grade the media for its AIDS-related coverage?

**Shilts:** I think that history will record the news media's response to AIDS as one of the darkest chapters in our profession. After Vietnam and Watergate, reporters became very aggressive in their pursuit of the truth. We stopped settling for press releases. We were going out to find out what the truth was. Not the official truth, but the real truth. But in covering AIDS, we've generally had newswriting by press release. If it's not on a government press release, the major national news organizations just don't report it.

The New York Times is not altogether as irresponsible as it was two or three years ago. For years it didn't even cover the fact that this epidemic existed to any degree in its own city. Now it does a good job of covering local issues but still has absolutely no intelligent coverage of the national AIDS issues. Ditto for the Washington Post. And the television networks are as
They've ignored it. They've given new depth to the meaning of shallow.

**SF Focus:** Is the media coverage getting better or worse?

**Shilts:** AIDS is simply slipping out of the news because it's become so commonplace. I'm really concerned that in the early nineties there will be a Vietnamization of AIDS. We'll simply get used to the body counts.

**SF Focus:** What about your paper, our morning daily, the Chronicle?

**Shilts:** I think that we started out way ahead on this for the same reason that, in every way, San Francisco as a city has done a better job. Most cities and most institutions dealing with AIDS first had to get used to the notion of dealing with gay people and then had to get used to the notion of dealing

"THEY MAY WEAR WHITE COATS AND HAVE DOCTOR IN FRONT OF THEIR NAMES, BUT THEY CAN BE AS DECEITFUL AS ANY POLITICIAN."

with the disease. In San Francisco, whether you're talking about the Department of Public Health or the Chronicle, the idea of dealing with gay people was already there. I was already at the Chronicle, reporting on gay issues, before AIDS hit.

The great mistake that most media have made with AIDS is they've dealt with it as only a medical story. Every microscopic development of the science of AIDS is given this huge treatment, while they've ignored the politics. My premise has always been that AIDS is nine parts politics and one part medicine. The reason we don't have treatments today has far less to do with the medicine of AIDS than it does with the politics. First the Reagan administration and now the Bush administration is not giving enough staffing and funds to the agencies that are supposed to be doing the testing. That's politics and that's what doesn't get covered.

At the Chronicle we divided up our coverage so that the science writers do the science of it and I do the politics. I think that's what's made our coverage completely different—and in news circles somewhat controversial. Because what I do challenges government officials and health officials. Most of the people in charge of the federal health agencies are eminent scientists or doctors. And for some reason reporters feel insecure about challenging them. Well, these guys may wear white coats and have Doctor in front of their names, but they can be as dissembling and deceitful as any politician. And that's the way I treat them.

**SF Focus:** How have those in the media treated you?

**Shilts:** I went to one television station and applied for a job here about ten years ago. This was after I'd been on KQED for a couple of years and had been nominated for an Emmy. Nobody argued my professional competence. I was simply told that I could not be a reporter at that television station because some viewer might see me on the air, having read in Herb Caen or somewhere that I was gay, and switch the channel.

**SF Focus:** Would that happen if you approached the networks today?

**Shilts:** I think discrimination is still the rule in television. There's only one openly gay television reporter here in San Francisco. And that's twelve years after I was hired at KQED. I'll always be grateful for the opportunity that I got from KQED, because I believe if I hadn't been there, I never would have been allowed to work in the mainstream media.

**SF Focus:** But haven't there been times when you paid a price for being so open?

**Shilts:** Yes. When I graduated in [1975] from journalism school at the University of Oregon—at the top of my class—my faculty advisors told me not to be open about being gay and not to cover gay issues. They warned that it would pigeonhole me and destroy my career. I went against that advice. But during my last month at journalism school I was one of eight college journalists selected to compete in a national writing championship sponsored by the William Randolph Hearst Foundation held in San Francisco. We had to write about Dianne Feinstein. I researched her to death [laughs] and won second place. To celebrate I took all

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the other contestants out to the City Cabaret, a famous gay disco, to show them a taste of the city.

The next morning the Hearst Foundation people freaked. They took everybody aside, one by one, and asked them what had happened, where I had taken them. They were obsessed over whether I had taken any of them back to my hotel room. Two weeks later, the Hearst people sent my school faculty a letter saying that they'd made a judging error and that I really hadn't won the prize. They awarded it to someone else and cancelled my one-thousand-dollar check. The journalism faculty rallied to my side because it was so obvious that this was an act of sheer bigotry. The school then voted to pull itself out of future Hearst competitions.

SF Focus: Was there ever a point where you felt you'd have to switch careers because of your sexual identity?

Shilts: In 1980 KQED cancelled Evening Edition. At that point it appeared to me I would have to give up journalism. I went on unemployment. Nobody would give me a job. As my last stab, I wrote The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk. When I finished it I was prepared to give up journalism, because it seemed I'd made a grievous error about being openly gay. That's when my break at the Chronicle came. The late Jerry Burns, the city editor at the time, had the courage to hire me. And that coincided with the reports of the first cases of this mysterious skin cancer and pneumonia detected here and in New York among gay men.

SF Focus: As an openly gay reporter, are you still a rarity in the print media? Hasn't your success opened the way for other gay writers across the country?

Shilts: Not at the big papers.

SF Focus: Do editors somehow assume that an openly gay reporter can't be objective?

Shilts: Exactly. People assume you're an activist if you say that you're gay. So it means that nobody who says they're gay can get a job. And the point that I tried to make is that I fundamentally believe that being openly gay is not a political statement. It is an assertion of my integrity as a human being. Basically I don't think there's anything about my being gay that makes me any less a person than a heterosexual. When heterosexuals start hiding their wedding rings and start covering up the fact that they're married with kids, I'll start covering up the fact that I'm gay.

There are editors at major papers who will not assign a gay reporter to cover AIDS.

SF Focus: America has had a hard time accepting gays. Has the AIDS catastrophe spurred that acceptance or made it less likely to happen?

Shilts: I think there's decreased homophobia in broad terms. I graduated from high school in 1969, and I had only heard the word homosexual once by the time I was eighteen. Back then, lord knows, the word gay was never used and homosexuality was in no way, shape, or form discussed. It's amazing that my whole generation—and I think I'm typical of my generation—has managed to adjust as well as we have, even though in our childhoods this key part of our identity was considered so despicable you couldn't even mention it. And now you've got whole generations being brought up not only hearing the words, but hearing them discussed in the context of whether or not gay people should be granted equal rights, whether lesbians should keep their kids. Once you start talking about it, half the chore is done. The taboo is gone.

In 1984 I did a series for the Chronicle, a profile of gay America. I figured it was the apogee of the gay movement, and I'd better get the snapshot before the backlash against the gay movement, which I felt would certainly come as AIDS cases mounted up.

Well, I was wrong. [laughs] I was way off. If anything, I think AIDS has legitimized the gay community as a minority group. In fact, it's done that profoundly in the media.

SF Focus: Do you think society will ever view all men and women—gay and straight—as equal?

Shilts: I have no doubt that there will come a time when most people will believe that being lesbian or gay is no more of a reflection of a human being's worth than being left-handed or right-handed. But social change of that magnitude doesn't happen in one year or even one decade.

SF Focus: Within the gay community there are those who seem to be moving toward very radical politics—protests like the blockade on the Golden Gate Bridge early this year.
Shilts: Protest politics don’t always work. At the Chronicle I know a lot of people who were entirely sympathetic to the cause of AIDS. They arrived late at the office the day of the Golden Gate Bridge showdown and they arrived furious. Last year, almost 80 percent of the Marin County residents who voted on Prop 102 voted against it, so I think people in Marin have their consciousness pretty well raised about AIDS. Many of the newly radicalized people have more anger than intelligence when it comes to where to direct their activities.

SF Focus: You created a storm of controversy when you strongly urged in one of your Chronicle columns that gays reach out to leaders like Archbishop John Quinn for support on the AIDS issue, even though he does not support gay rights.

Shilts: Yes. Everybody got mad when I said that you’ve got to have Quinn on the AIDS commission. But people need to realize that AIDS in San Francisco is a vast and horrible problem. Somebody like Quinn has considerable resources to help with the problem, and he also has clout with a large part of the community. To not involve him is insane. You’ve got to be realistic. You can’t make everybody fall in line with a whole laundry list of gay rights issues or you’re going to severely limit your resources and allies.

SF Focus: Recently The Nation ran a story by a gay leader suggesting that homosexuals have become too obsessed with AIDS at the expense of everything else. What’s your response?

Shilts: I disagree. He made the numbers work to support his argument that a very small segment of the gay community would die. And that just isn’t so. Studies in San Francisco show that we’ve got about thirty-five thousand people infected. That’s one of every twenty people in the city. I don’t think most gay men sit down and realize what those proportions mean.

How can I not think about AIDS more when half my friends have it or are HIV positive? I [pause] cleaned out my Rolodex a few months ago. I took out eighty cards. It was a very painful experience. As a reporter, you sometimes treat people as statistics. This was different. I cried.

SF Focus: Does that make it difficult to go on day after day reporting on this devastating disease?

Shilts: No. At first, I swore when I was done with the book and done with the tour that I was not going to cover AIDS when I came back to work this year. Then I started getting closer and closer, and there are all these important stories that need to be done. I just felt I had to continue. It would be great if I had a choice, but I don’t feel I do. There isn’t anything nearly as interesting going on.

SF Focus: You’ve got no shortage of subjects. Take Compound Q, for instance. Researchers in San Francisco touted it as a drug that kills only HIV-infected cells, and the media really played it up as the light at the end of the tunnel. How do you see it?

Shilts: You really have to take these bursts of media attention with a grain of salt. If it works, Compound Q is just going to be terrific. It would virtually be the cure. However, you have to remember that this drug has never been used in a human. There have been substances that look good in the test tube before, but it’s a big leap from the test tube to proving something effective in humans.

SF Focus: But you have to start with lab research.

Shilts: Sure, and I think we’ll see more and more potentially promising substances. What irritates me is that it takes so long to get studies going to put them in people. That says to me that the resources really aren’t there to put that kind of research on the fast track.

SF Focus: What do you want? The research press conference was in April, and San Francisco General is set to begin human testing any time now. That’s a pretty fast track.

Shilts: I’m still skeptical. The public is just beginning to hear about the...
drug. But the researchers have been talking about it and promising testing since last December. I don't call that fast when you consider the seriousness of the situation.

SF Focus: So this is going to go through the same old foot-dragging?

Shilts: If the past is any indication it will, but I hope not. We've got to expedite the process so that we move as fast as possible while still being safe, because if this drug proves effective there's going to be political pressure to approve it faster than any other drug in history.

SF Focus: Suppose Compound Q does turn out to be the proverbial magic bullet. Let's say it's 1993, and you've spent better than ten years covering AIDS, and the situation is under control. Where do you direct your energy?

Shilts: It's so hard to project in the future beyond this wave of death. Life has to become a one-day-at-a-time process just in order to cope with this tragedy. It would be great one day if a cure were found, but that's something that hardly ever crosses my mind.

SF Focus: You said earlier you hadn't heard the word homosexual until you were eighteen. When did you know you were gay and when did you come out?

Shilts: I always knew there was something about me that was different. And I attribute being a well-adjusted homosexual to being an Eagle Scout. [laughs] You do so much fooling around on camp outs. But I didn't come out until I was about twenty and in college. It was 1972. The Vietnam War was going on, and like everybody in our generation I was very political. Once I got exposed to gay liberation and realized that I was all right, it just made perfect sense. So on May 19, 1972, I told everybody in my life that I was gay—my whole family, all my friends.

SF Focus: How did you do it?

Shilts: That day, as part of a term project, I was supposed to teach a class on the Yanamamo, a native tribe in the Amazon. At the last minute I changed it and dealt with the anthropological aspects of the gay minority. I had a panel of people from the local gay liberation group. And I put myself on it and announced that I was gay. I had all my friends come to the class. It was fairly dramatic. But since then I've never lived a day without having everybody in my life know that I'm gay. That's made my life so much easier.

SF Focus: What kind of response did you get from your family?

Shilts: It's funny because when I told my dad I was gay, he said, "I've known you were different since you were eight years old." When I told my brother I thought I was going to get rejection, but his only answer was, "Well, that's good. Every family should have one to talk about at cocktail parties." [laughs]

SF Focus: And your mother?

Shilts: I think she was fine with it. One of my brothers said that my mother probably would have preferred that I defect to the Martians, but that even if I had defected to the Martians they'd still love me. There weren't any real problems. I think the worst oppression that most lesbians and gay men experience is the oppression they bring on themselves. I think it's the self-hatred and the self-doubt, which is symbolized by being in the closet. Once you unite with who you really are, then anything society has to throw at you is small potatoes.

Being in the closet comes from being ashamed of yourself. I made a decision when I came out that I was never going to live another day of my life where I hid who I was from anybody.

SF Focus: But you didn't become a gay activist at the same time.

Shilts: When I became a journalism student I made the decision—I knew I'd face questions about my credibility, because I was open about being gay—that I'd never join a political organization, never contribute to a cause. Philosophically, I believe you shouldn't be an activist when you're a journalist. I've really stuck with that. I've never been an activist in any way.

SF Focus: You've also been very open about your struggle with alcoholism. Did you have a drinking problem for years before you took action?

Shilts: I'm an alcoholic because I was born with it, probably. I'm a recovering alcoholic now. Covering AIDS and being subjected to intense criticism from the gay community, that accelerated a problem that existed already. But there were incidents that really pushed me over the edge. When my mom died in 1983, my drinking went into a final tailspin. The last day I had a drink was February 22, 1984. The day before, the first friend I had who died of...
AIDS, Gary Walsh, who figures prominently in my book, died. And around then the gay press was just vitriolically attacking me. And I went out the day after Gary died and drank like crazy. I was working a swing shift and had six double shots of Jack Daniels back to back and then went back to the Chronicle.

That was the moment that terrified me, because I realized that not only was my drinking entirely out of control but I was threatening my career. I struggled so hard to get that job at the Chronicle after years of discrimination, and I was finally on a story that I felt was so important. And here I was blowing it for this cheap high. That was the day I quit, and I haven’t had a drink since.

**SF Focus:** So you’ve been clean and sober since then?

**Silts:** Not quite. I still needed a crutch. Essentially I quit drinking and just smoked a lot more marijuana. It was like switching deck chairs on the Titanic. I still wasn’t fixing the things in my life. I was still using a crutch to cover up my feelings. About a year later I realized what was going on. My work had been submitted for a Pulitzer that year. But I didn’t get it, and I was just crushed.

Then I had this moment of insight. I realized that I had expected this Pulitzer prize to come in and fix everything. And there was something wrong with me if I needed something other than myself to fix my life. Then I realized, hey, what am I doing every day? I’m smoking. I get up in the morning and smoke a joint. I get home from work and smoke a couple more joints. I was an addict. Marijuana is a horribly addictive drug. It was another year before I quit. That’s when my life really began to pick up and change.

**SF Focus:** What kind of changes?

**Silts:** In the process of recovering, I got deeper spiritual insights that helped sustain me in a personal way through this horrible AIDS stuff. Also, to be blunt, I could not have written my book if I were still smoking marijuana.

**SF Focus:** How has the spiritual side of drug and alcohol recovery programs specifically touched your life?

**Silts:** When I went into recovery, I was the biggest confirmed atheist in the world. And in fact, when I was about twenty years old I read Nietzsche and Hermann Hesse and I got a philosophy of life that didn’t change for about fifteen years. I just stuck with the same philosophy. And that entirely excluded the idea that there was a power greater than myself.

In recovery from drugs and alcohol, I found that when I acknowledged a higher power, my compulsion to drink and use marijuana was lifted from me. It’s almost like magic. It just lifts from you once you say, “I can’t deal with this. There’s something wrong with me, and I need help.” That help comes.

I still feel uncomfortable with the word God, not because of how I would think about it, but mainly because for so many other people there’s this patriarchal image of some guy sitting on a chair with a big accounting book, adding up when you’ve been naughty and nice. I feel uncomfortable with that.

Yet the greatest addition to my life has been to have the sense that there is a source of strength beyond what I have. The way I got through the God barrier was that somebody said to me, “Whether you believe in God or not is not important. What’s important is to know that you’re not God.”

**SF Focus:** You sound almost happy about being a recovering alcoholic.

**Silts:** Yes. I’ve come to feel very grateful for the fact that I was an alcoholic and had my addiction to marijuana, because in recovery I’ve gotten the chance to totally reanalyze my life and set it on a much better course.

**SF Focus:** The rise of spirituality in the gay community has gotten a lot of attention in the media. Spirituality seems to have become a big part of everyday life. Is it as important as sex was during the bathhouse period?

**Silts:** I think the biggest shift in the gay community in the past two years has been the reintegration of the spiritual side to life. I hate it when people say the lesbian and gay community is growing up, because I think that’s somewhat patronizing. But at the same time I think there has been a dramatic shift of people adding spiritual strength to the armamentarium with which to cope with this crisis.

**SF Focus:** You talk of the lesbian and gay community as a whole. There was a time when that was unheard of. The two groups were hardly allies.

**Silts:** I think that’s the second most
signifcant trend in the community, perhaps even of equal significance to the rise in spirituality. There’s been a dissolution of the separatism between the groups and a real coming together of lesbians and gay men.  

**SF Focus:** Maybe the timing is appropriate. This year is the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall riot, and this month’s Gay Freedom Day parade is expected to bring together more gays and lesbians than any previous one. And next year San Francisco hosts another major gathering, the International AIDS Conference.  

**Shilts:** Montreal hosts it this year, and it will be the largest gathering of scientists in one place. It’s incredibly significant. They all save their best data to present. And the conference next year will be larger still. With the brainstorming and networking that goes on, these meetings really push along our understanding of the epidemic.  

**SF Focus:** You’ve suggested, though, that the fate of the San Francisco conference—and other AIDS conferences held in the United States—may be in jeopardy because of our immigration laws.  

**Shilts:** Well, take a look at what happened to Hans Verhoef. Here you had a Dutch citizen on his way to an AIDS conference in San Francisco. Immigration found out he had AIDS and threw him into jail for a week, until the courts moved to let him out. And the Bush administration did everything it could to keep him in prison.  

What we face next year in San Francisco is that scenario being repeated a thousand times over. These conferences always draw a lot of people with AIDS, because many of them are working in the forefront of AIDS prevention. So we could have as many as a thousand people being jailed by Immigration as they step off airplanes at San Francisco International.  

American scientific leaders may be willing to turn their backs and act like it’s not going to happen, but this incident caused immense concern around the world, and there is talk that without a policy change from Washington the San Francisco conference will be cancelled.  

**SF Focus:** Are you hopeful that that can be avoided?  

**Shilts:** No. I don’t believe the Bush administration is going to back down. I’m afraid they’re going to listen to people on the far right and say, “We’re not going to change this regulation.” Beyond that, Bush could just say we’re not going to enforce it, but he won’t.  

**SF Focus:** What if George Bush were to call you today and ask, “Randy, what should I do about AIDS right now?” What would you tell him?  

**Shilts:** I’d tell him to get past his compassion. Throughout the 1980s everybody has been talking about how we need to have a compassionate, caring response to this epidemic. I think we’ve reached that consensus. George Bush now talks about having a compassionate, caring response for AIDS patients. That’s nice, but it’s time to move beyond that.  

The next step is mobilization. We have to put AIDS programs on an emergency footing. That means that you expedite research as much as you can on AIDS treatments to find out what works and what doesn’t. That means that you cut every bureaucratic corner and slice as much red tape as you can to get AIDS prevention projects out in the field for intravenous drug users. And it also means we will have to pour substantially greater sums of money into drug treatment programs to help people kick drugs altogether, so they aren’t getting infected. Anything short of that and we’re just conducting business as usual.  

To me, having a kinder, gentler nation at this point just means that people will say nice things over the bodies at our funerals. I’d rather have more people still alive in four or five years.  

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