

Vermont News

ACT UP Protest in Burlington

by Michael Warner

On Saturday, December 1, 1990, to mark the observance of World AIDS Awareness Day, the Vermont arm of ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, staged a two hour rally, march, and "die-in" on the Church Street Marketplace in Burlington.

The protest was held to draw attention to the need for increased support for AIDS treatment and research as well as to vent anger and rage at the current lack of governmental support. According to organizers of the event, more deaths have occurred nationwide during the AIDS crisis than lives were lost in the Vietnam war. Worldwide, one AIDS-related death occurs every ten minutes.

Amid a large crowd of holiday shoppers, the protesters marched up Church Street chanting, "Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, AIDS phobia's got to go!" Some handed out stickers and packets of condoms as they proceeded up the street.

By noon, the group of over 50 men, women, and children had formed a circle in front of the entrance to the Burlington Square Mall. With slogans such as, "Money for AIDS, not for war!" and "Racist, sexist, anti-gay; George Bush - go away!" they paraded, clapped, and shouted, drowning out the piped-in sounds of Christmas music.

Every few minutes some of the protesters would "die." Seemingly without warning, they would drop to the ground, wailing and moaning in pain and anguish. Other members of the group then rushed in to draw chalk lines around the "corpses," adding a name and date next to each body to symbolize someone who had died of AIDS.

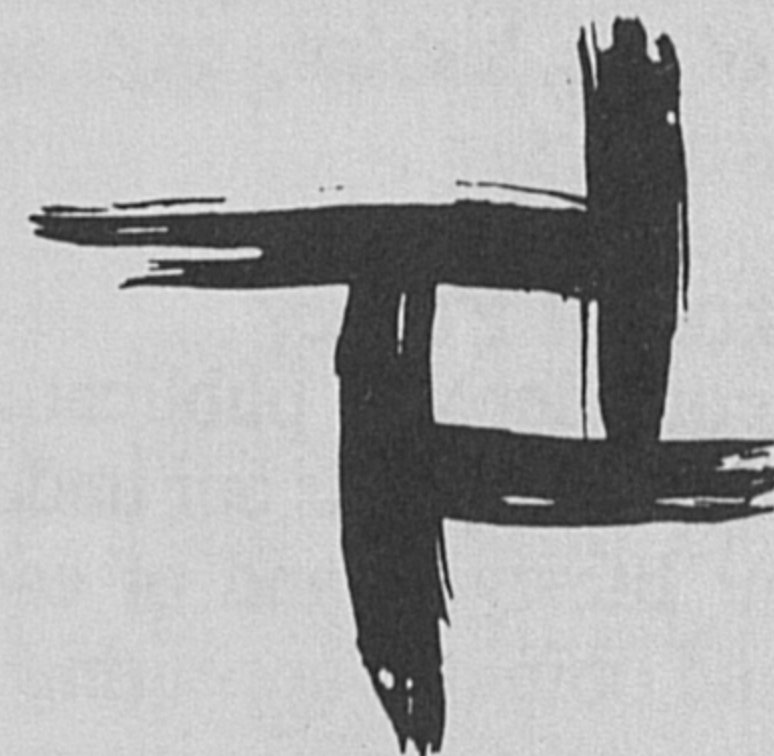
A second ring of supporters and onlookers surrounded the protesters. TV crews and reporters from the local media conducted interviews and snapped pictures as the chanting continued.

"We're here, we're queer and we're not going shopping!" seemed to amuse the more perplexed bystanders, including mall workers

dressed as elves who refused to join the protest. After several die-ins, the brick walkway in front of Woolworths was strewn with dozens of ghost-like silhouettes. Small black stickers featuring a bloody palm-print were mixed in with the outlines and their haunting messages.

The protest, although loud, remained peaceful until the procession entered the Burlington Square Mall. As the large, shouting group marched through the shopping area, it forced customers to step aside. Security guards ordered the protesters to leave the mall, but as the group made its way toward an exit, a confrontation resulted in the arrest of two protesters. John Kusakabe and Stephanie Lind, both students at the University of Vermont, were arrested for unlawful trespass.

A subsequent protest was held on Friday, December 8, 1990, both at the Burlington Police Department and in front of the Burlington Square Mall. About 70 people gathered to protest alleged racist remarks and brutal tactics used in the arrests of Kusakabe and Lind, who are scheduled to appear in court in January.



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