

Book Review—

Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures

by Eric Rofes

BY RIC KASINI KADOUR

Since the 1996 International Conference on HIV and AIDS in Vancouver, British Columbia, leaders in the AIDS community have struggled to make sense of gay men's experience of AIDS with the advent of anti-retroviral therapies. While HIV transmission appears to be on the decline in most gay communities, transmission among gay men under 25 years of age is rising steadily. Gay men were beginning to recreate their lives as they were in the 1970's with Circuit Parties, bacchanalian multi-day events based on a disco formula of music, sex, and drugs. By 1997, many AIDS organizations began to feel the support of the gay and lesbian community waning.

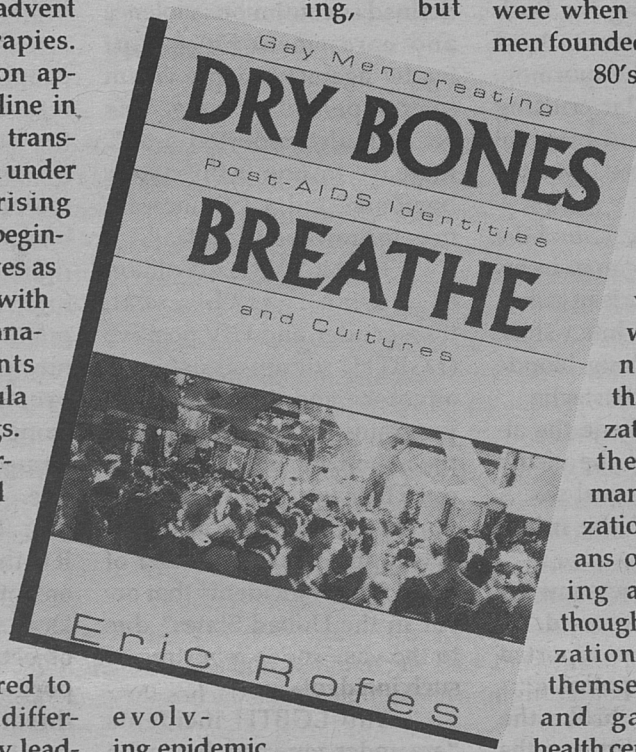
After the Vancouver conference, gay men appeared to develop a growing indifference to AIDS. Many gay leaders offered explanations: Gay men were fatigued. Gay men needed to forget about AIDS for a while. Fewer gay men were dying therefore it was less of an issue for gay men. Etc, Etc. But nobody has offered a complete analysis of gay men's relationship to AIDS...until now.

Eric Rofes, a doctorate student in Social and Cultural Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, a long-time activist and the author of *Reviving the Tribe*, has a new book called *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures* (published by Harrington Park Press, 1998).

Dry Bones Breathe is a description and analysis of gay men's changing relationship to the AIDS in the mid-90's. In a brilliant move, Rofes distinguishes the biomedical epidemic of AIDS from the sociopolitical AIDS crisis of gay men in the 80's and early 90's. From there, Rofes outlines what he feels is the end of the communal crisis of AIDS, chronicling the rise in unprotected sex, STD rates, Circuit Parties, and the re-opening of sex clubs and bath houses.

The notion of AIDS as a disease and AIDS as a cultural event has been dealt with before in a *New York Times Magazine* article by Andrew Sullivan and a piece by Dan Savage that appeared in *Seattle's* alternative weekly *The Stranger*. Rofes

is the first to explore this distinction with depth and scholarly attention that a full length book allows. As a result, Rofes is able to discuss the diminishing role of AIDS in gay men's culture and still acknowledge the reality of a continuing, but



evolving epidemic. While *Dry Bones Breathe* is a must read for anyone looking to understand the gay men's culture, Rofes is best read with a few grains of salt. Like most people who has been an active player in the AIDS community, Rofes writes with bitterness toward AIDS service organizations and national AIDS advocacy groups. With an almost schizophrenic fervor, he chastises the national media for the End-of-AIDS hype and AIDS organizations for their continuing message "AIDS is Not Over." He blames unprotected sex on static HIV prevention efforts that have failed to acknowledge gay men's changing relationship to AIDS. At the same time, Rofes attributes the increase in sexual risk among gay men to a new understanding of a seemingly manageable HIV disease. The result is a book that jumps around and appears on the surface to be critical of everything.

At the end of *Dry Bones Breathe*, Rofes outlines his vision for the AIDS community. Rofes suggests that AIDS service organizations, HIV prevention programs, and national AIDS advocacy or political organizations need to change the way they operate in order to respond to gay men's changing needs. He sees these organizations and programs expanding to address larger gay men's health needs and community development

among gay men.

While this is a nice thought, Rofes misunderstands the nature and function of most AIDS organizations in the late 1990's. AIDS organizations are no longer equivalent to gay organizations as they were when lesbians and gay men founded them in the mid-80's. Most AIDS organizations are abandoning their status as gay organizations in order to serve a more diverse population with HIV. One cannot even assume that an AIDS organization is gay friendly, these days. And many of these organizations have few lesbians or gay men working at them. So the thought of AIDS organizations transforming themselves into lesbian and gay community health centers is a good idea come too late.

■ *Ed. Note: Eric Rofes will be speaking at 7pm Thursday, June 18th at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Burlington. See announcement on page 4 for more details.*

Youth Advocate for Safe Schools

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commitment in supporting all youth. Many are already making plans to take him up on his offers, such as Palmer Legare from the gay/straight alliance in Cabot and Tami Eldridge, the Executive Director of Outright Vermont.

One school that accepted Dean's offer is Union 32 High School in East Montpelier. The Governor gave a 45-minute talk to hundreds of U-32 students on Thursday, May 7. He sent a strong message that homophobia has no place in schools. As quoted in *The Burlington Free Press*, Dean hopes his appearance "opened up the thought process." He explained, "I just don't think we can live in a society where intolerance to other human beings is acceptable." In a telephone interview, Tami Eldridge of Outright Vermont expressed great delight at the advances we have made. "These are really exciting times for GLBTQ youth," she said. Eldridge credits a statewide collaboration of GLBTQ and allied youth and adults for these accomplishments. The *Queer Youth Provider Network* is a strong leader in this effort. Kate Geiges from Youth

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Aware of Addison County credits the Network for "defragmenting, unifying and strengthening" our community. However, if it wasn't for Outright Vermont, this author proclaims, we may never have reached this far.

At the same time, Eldridge cautions not to leave bisexual, transgendered and questioning youth out of the discussion, and to avoid simple comparisons between racism and homophobia. "While the roots of all oppressions may have similarities," she explained, "the aspects and experiences are very different." There is nothing you can truly equate with homophobia or the experience growing up gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or questioning. We need to go more in-depth when speaking about GLBTQ youth. Additionally, Eldridge points out that people often present racism as an issue that has been successfully eliminated. "In fact," she reminds us, "racism is alive and well, and remains a problem both in the GLBTQ community and the community at large."

Finally, as far as gay/straight alliances are con-

cerned, they're popping up all over the place! There is known to be about ten of them across the state. Recently, the principal of Vergennes Union High School has been working with the school board to form a GSA there. This is a big step for such a conservative community. Stan Baker, a plaintiff in the freedom to marry lawsuit, boasted that the former mayor (now the Director of Guidance Services and a guidance counselor at the school) once claimed that "there are no gay people in Vergennes." Today, many of these so-called "non-existing" youth are speaking up - and their message is loud and clear - we will not be ignored. People who work with youth could benefit if they took one message to heart; that is, Outright's chants from last year's Pride march: "2-4-6-8, don't assume your kids are straight!" and "What do we want?...Safe Schools!...When do we want it?...Now!"

Andrew J. Campbell is the new Youth Editor for Out in the Mountains. If you have an event or story relating to or affecting gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or questioning youth, please e-mail oitmyouth@usa.net or write to Drew Campbell, PO Box #942, Middlebury, VT 05753-0942