

# The Rise of GMHC

by Robert W. Cabell

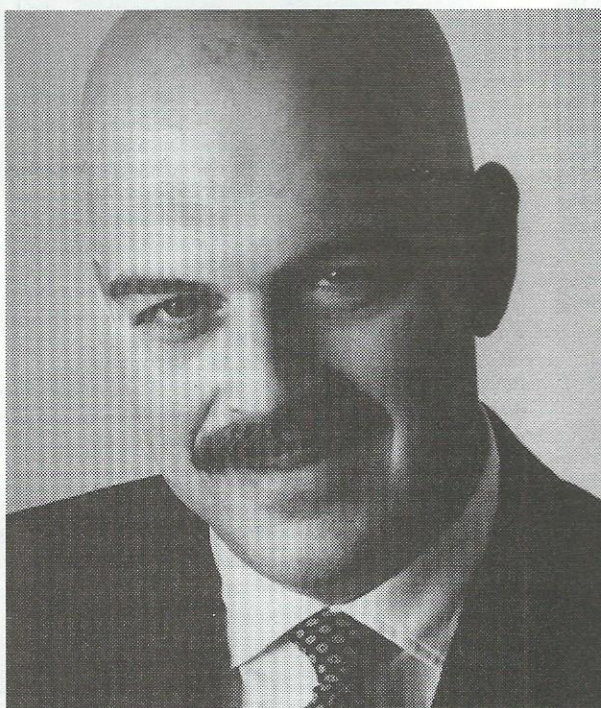
In August of 1981, eighty men gathered in writer, Larry Kramer's New York apartment to hear a doctor lecture on "Gay Cancer." Six months later, this group of men formed the "Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC).

GMHC is one of the few true "Gay Institutions" that has achieved worldwide recognition and respect. This 31 million dollar a year institution transformed from an answering machine in someone's apartment, into an organization composed of 305 employees, 6,500 volunteers and over 10,000 patients. SH!OUT met with its Executive Director, Mark Robinson to hear him speak on the organizations beginnings, growth, and hopes for the future.

The first service offered by GMHC was a hot line: an answering machine in someone's apartment. The service simply consisted of a series of resources, built up by word of mouth, for people who were ill. Our second service was the "Buddy Service." That was highly innovative. I do not believe a system like that existed any place in the world at that time. It was an attempt to link up a healthy person with a sick person in order to provide the sick individual with all the care he needed up to and including his death. Today we have approximately 300 Buddies who reach 500 to 600 of our 10,000 clients. Once the "Buddy System" began in earnest, additional services were developed: hot meals, bereavement and grief counseling, in home therapy, and

case management.

GMHC is not an AIDS research organization, although we do help raise money for research. We focus on three main areas. We have an educational component that focuses on prevention and includes a new service that we call "Health Promotion" which is aimed at people who are infected but not symptomatic. Health Promotion tries to reach them in the early stages of HIV related diseases so they can make good



**Mark Robinson, Director, GMHC**

choices about what kind of medicines to take and what kind of lifestyle changes to adopt. The aim is to prolong periods of good health. The "Health Promotion" project is a big chunk of our services.

We also offer more direct and clinical services to people who have an AIDS diagnosis. They include, massage, acupuncture, chiropractic and recreational activities. We serve 55,000 hot meals a year. We have a life program, which serves 14,000 people, that deals with children who have AIDS or whose parents have AIDS.

Our third area of focus is our National Advocacy Effort. That

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Advocacy is aimed primarily at government. It attempts to promote legislation to help people with HIV/AIDS to live better lives. We have experienced some success in advocating for more money to do research. GMHC does not actually conduct any research projects.

I first became involved with GMHC as a volunteer. I remember strolling around Lincoln Center in 1986 and seeing all these guys with red ribbons. That was the first AIDS Walk. GMHC sponsored it and I wanted to be involved as an AIDS Walk Volunteer. My background was as an accountant. Once you get involved down here you get hooked.

There is kind of a pull and tug within the organization with some people who feel we've lost our grass roots movement. We try to manage the institution and keep the community feeling the grass roots touch. But it's a challenge. Somewhere in the middle 80's GMHC got their first grant. GMHC began to develop an infra-structure. Before that GMHC functioned primarily through the services of volunteers. Accountability became more important.

It's a very seductive place. At that time I worked for Joe Papp down at the Public Theatre as Director of Finance. When he died, I decided it was time for a change. I started here in March of 1992 in response to an ad. In time I became the Director of both Systems and Finance. That's another thing GMHC is famous for, giving out multiple jobs.

In the beginning GMHC, as with the AIDS Virus, was predominately men. As the epidemic spread, women wanted to come work at the organization and volunteer. In addition, they found they were having loved ones and partners who contracted the disease and were dying. Now we are somewhere between 37 - 38% women. In fact, in the last 12 months we've adopted an Affirmative Action Program. 43% of our new hires have been women and 53% of