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# ‘Not again’: For gay men in Houston, COVID brings up familiar feelings of AIDS crisis



**Emily Foxhall**

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Keville Ware, a staff therapist for the Montrose Center, poses for a portrait Oct. 29, 2020, at the center in Houston. He retired Nov. 30.

Photo: Jon Shapley, Staff photographer / Staff photographer

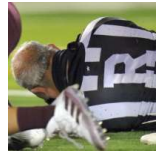
Twice a week on Zoom, Keville Ware counseled men who had already survived an epidemic.

The gay men in his support groups never forgot the years when AIDS took so many friends.

AIDS is no longer a death sentence, as it was. Nearly 450,000 people with it died in the United States from 1981 to the end of 2000. The state estimates some 94,000 Texans had AIDS in 2018. People such as Ware came to grips with the fact that they would have to live without those they had lost.

And then, this year, the new coronavirus arrived — a second deadly pathogen for them to face some 35 years after the initial horrors they experienced as younger men.

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For some clients, Ware saw the emotion return in flashbacks.

Shock. Fear. Sadness. Fatigue.

He saw hyper-vigilance and fatalistic thinking.

People receiving treatment for HIV are not believed to be at greater risk for COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But they do have higher rates for other underlying conditions.

Now in their 60s and 70s, some of Ware's clients assumed this time they would die.

“There’s a lot of terror,” said Ware, 65. “There’s some anger. The unfairness of this, having to go through this again, feeling robbed of the retirement years.”

The two epidemics had similarities: a fear that one wrong interaction could kill you, desperation for a treatment. Some people resist wearing masks today, just as some resisted using condoms to practice safe sex.

Houston men who survived the AIDS epidemic talk about how the COVID-19 pandemic stirs up old memories.

Video: Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, confronted both pathogens amid what seemed like White House indifference. President Ronald Reagan was at first silent on AIDS. President Donald Trump dismissed COVID-19, which has killed

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more than 22,000 Texans.

There was also an important difference: The entire nation did not get behind a search to cure AIDS, a disease initially seen as predominantly affecting the gay community.

Ware, who became a staff therapist for the Montrose Center, was focused on just getting through the AIDS epidemic. He is HIV-positive.

Only later did he realize the trauma that those years left behind.

Facing COVID-19, Ware felt distressed and overwhelmed by the thought of counseling people through another epidemic. He decided to retire earlier than anticipated; his last day was Nov. 30.

The therapy groups will carry on. Here are the perspectives of three of the members, all AIDS-era survivors, on the coronavirus pandemic.

Alfred Gomez poses for a portrait Oct. 1, 2020, in Houston. "Well, the gay experience is a succession of traumas," he said, comparing his experience living through the height of the AIDS crisis to that of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Thank God, virtually I've had my support groups, because this has been really tough." [... more](#)

### **Alfred Gomez**

With AIDS, Alfred Gomez formed what he called an "unholy alliance."

There was no such thing as completely safe sex, but there was safer sex, with a condom or only after having been tested for HIV.

Gomez, looking for someone to settle down with, got sick anyway.

His partner said he was tested weekly. Then Gomez collapsed while teaching and learned he was positive for HIV. A doctor told him he had three months to live.

Gomez realized there were worse things than death, such as seeing the sadness in people he loved watching him possibly dying. His weight dropped to 110 pounds.

His doctor wasn't sure of the treatment that he tried. But it worked.

None of what Gomez went through then prepared him for how fast the coronavirus changed his life.

*Oh my God, he thought when he learned of COVID-19. Here's something else.*

Again, no interaction felt entirely safe. What if a sick person touched his Kroger groceries delivery? What if someone who looked healthy wasn't?

He felt a parallel demand on his trust when people insisted they had been staying home or tested negative.

"But see it can burn you," Gomez said, "just like it did me."

Slowly, Gomez ventured out from his Third Ward home. He went to H-E-B for groceries but not to restaurants. (The CDC recommends those with

HIV take everyday precautions, limit in-person medical visits and maintain a social life remotely.)

Gomez struggled against isolation. Friends during the AIDS crisis took care of him. Now he felt that if he were to get sick, he would be on his own.

“That’s what’s so sad about this whole thing,” said Gomez, 62, “is that the elderly feel the most vulnerable, the most lonely, and they’re the ones the virus attacks the most.”

Gomez decided he would try to lose weight and get in better shape. But he feels people were meant to be around each other; to see each other’s smiles. He is dating someone, which he called a calculated risk.

“It’s killing us,” he said of the isolation. “It’s killing us all.”

So he does his best to be resilient. Every day he wakes up and asks: How am I going to cope? How am I going to make the best of it?

Brandon Wolf pauses while talking about his late partner Michael Cole, who died in 1993 after contracting HIV, during a portrait session Oct. 1, 2020, at his home in Houston. Wolf said he came up with a list of about 220 people he knew who had died before effective treatments for HIV and AIDS became available. "I've already been through something like this for 15 years," he said [compa... more](#)

## **Brandon Wolf**

For Brandon Wolf, the coronavirus pandemic felt like a replay of 1980 to

1995, when all he and other gay men thought about was AIDS.

Learning of it for the first time, Wolf thought, *Oh God, not again.*

This time, Wolf realized that everyone was at risk. And everyone eagerly awaited a vaccine.

“It was like ‘AIDS for everyone,’” said Wolf.

In the ‘80s, the juxtaposition had been jarring. Most Americans then seemed to be going on with life. Some made moral judgments, as if gay men deserved it.

Trying to explain the impact of AIDS to those it didn’t affect left Wolf frustrated and lonely.

Wolf couldn’t ignore the disease. His partner was HIV-positive. He attended several memorial services a week. At one point, he wrote down everyone he could think of who had died and came up with 220 people.

A writer for OutSmart magazine who lives in the Memorial area, Wolf didn’t fully face those emotions until he worked on the oH project, a collection of oral histories of the AIDS epidemic housed at Rice University.

Brandon Wolf shows off a badge from the oH Project, an oral history of HIV and AIDS in Houston, during a portrait session Oct. 1, 2020, at his home in Houston. Wolf said he came up with a list of about 220 people he knew who had died before effective treatments for HIV and AIDS became

available. "I've already been through something like this for 15 years," he said comparing the ... [more](#)

Still, while the threat of HIV ultimately seemed manageable, Wolf found the coronavirus terrifying. He was 72 and had an asthma condition. He got his groceries delivered. He barely went out.

He felt cheated because of it. Instead of going to a movie, restaurant or art gallery, he watched “Say I Do” on Netflix with his miniature schnauzer-rat terrier mix, Bella.

He didn’t want to take any chances. His partner, Michael Cole, died in 1993, before AIDS treatment was widely available.

Looking back, Wolf can’t imagine not having been able to hold Cole as he grew weaker, like families now can’t hug relatives dying of COVID-19.

Pressley Giles, Jr., poses for a portrait Nov. 25, 2020, at his apartment in Houston.

Photo: Jon Shapley, Staff photographer / Staff photographer

## **Pressley Giles**

Pressley Giles, Jr., went with friends to a Jack In The Box in Los Angeles, where he spotted a young man by himself. His skin was patchy. He had grown a beard over blotches on his face.

Normally, Giles would have invited him over. But it was the early ‘80s. He knew this man had AIDS, caused by HIV, and he wasn’t ready to face the reality of that disease. He didn’t want to accept that *he* could be that man.

Giles watched that same denial return with COVID-19, as people tried to pretend it didn't exist and hoped it would go away, as Trump once predicted. Giles wanted to go about his life, too, during the AIDS crisis.

HIV never disappeared.

A native of Yoakum, Texas, Giles got tested for HIV and made efforts to protect himself. But he focused his energy on pursuing a career with production companies. He distanced himself from the truth of what was happening with AIDS.

Still, he lost friends — and an important mentor. Then, on Jan. 10, 1997, a doctor he'd seen for a routine exam called to tell him he was HIV-positive. Giles called his mother, not to tell her the news but to hear her voice.

He decided that afternoon to go to work anyway. Living in New York City at the time, he remembered looking at the sky, looking at the grass and feeling the wind. It hit him how beautiful life was.

"It felt like, 'Oh my God, I'm alive,'" the Westchase resident said. "And I realized for the first time in a long time, I was alive and I was glad to be alive."

At a group counseling session, he heard the couple in front of him talking about death and left. He didn't want that negativity. He was going to make

it. He moved to Atlanta to get the treatment he wanted — and it worked.

Giles, 62, still refuses to live in fear. However, he's diabetic and has high blood pressure, among other issues, so he's cautious with the coronavirus. With a constant news cycle, he finds COVID-19 impossible to ignore. There's encouraging news — a vaccine may become widely available in the spring.

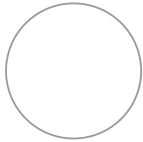
Meanwhile Giles lives as fully as he can. He is starting a nonprofit to help veterans find homes. He just graduated from a program that taught him to promote education around AIDS.

And Giles is proud of what he's done, pursuing his dreams even if he didn't always succeed. He visited the places he wanted. He worked until last year as a METRO Houston bus driver.

Growing up as a Black, gay man, he learned to protect and fight for himself. He believes these defenses helped him battle HIV. But he is working now to take down those protective layers.

He's learning, he says, "I don't need it as much anymore."

Emily Foxhall covers the environment for the Houston Chronicle. Read her on our [free site](#), [chron.com](https://www.chron.com), and on our [subscriber site](#), [HoustonChronicle.com](https://www.houstonchronicle.com). | [emily.foxhall@chron.com](mailto:emily.foxhall@chron.com) | Twitter: [emfoxhall](#)



**Emily Foxhall**

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Emily Foxhall covers the environment for the Houston Chronicle. She joined the paper in 2015 as a suburban reporter. She has documented the city's sprawl while playing a key role in the paper's breaking news and enterprise coverage. Her reconstruction of the Santa Fe High School shooting, along with two other colleagues, won first place for feature writing from the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors. She was part of the Chronicle team that was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for breaking news in 2017 for coverage of Hurricane Harvey. Soon after, she began roaming the state as the Texas Storyteller.

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