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WE WERE HERE, A HEART-WRENCHING LOOK AT THE EARLY DAYS OF THE AIDS CRISIS IN SAN FRANCISCO AS TOLD BY THE SURVIVORS, PREMIERES ON INDEPENDENT LENS ON THURSDAY, JUNE 14, 2012

“Of all the cinematic explorations of the AIDS crisis, not one is more heartbreaking and inspiring than *We Were Here*. The humility, wisdom and cumulative sorrow expressed lend the film a glow of spirituality and infuse it with grace. One of the top ten films of the year.” -- Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*

“It’s impossible for a single film to capture the devastation wrought by AIDS, or the heroism with which many in the LGBT community responded to it. But director David Weissman’s documentary is such a powerful achievement because he just about does it.” -- Ernest Hardy, *LA Weekly*

(San Francisco, CA) — Both inspiring and devastating, David Weissman’s [*We Were Here*](#) revisits the arrival in San Francisco of what was called the “Gay Plague” in the early 1980s. It illuminates the profound personal and community issues raised by the AIDS epidemic as well as the broad political and social upheavals it unleashed. It offers a cathartic validation for the generation that suffered through, and responded to, the onset of AIDS while opening a window of understanding to those who have only the vaguest notions of what transpired in those years. A powerful story of bravery, compassion, and love in the worst of times, *We Were Here* will premiere on the Emmy® Award-winning PBS series [*Independent Lens*](#), hosted by Mary Louise Parker, on Thursday, June 14, 2012 at 10 PM.

Early in the epidemic, San Francisco’s compassionate, multifaceted, and creative response to AIDS became known as “The San Francisco Model.” The city’s activist and progressive



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infrastructure that evolved out of the 1960s, combined with San Francisco's highly politicized gay community centered around the Castro Street neighborhood, helped overcome the indifference of a nation both homophobic and lacking in universal health care. In its suffering, San Francisco mirrors the experience of so many American cities during those harrowing years. In its response, San Francisco created a model that remains a standard to aspire to in seeking a healthier, more just, more humane society.

We Were Here focuses on the stories of five unforgettable individuals, all of whom lived in San Francisco prior to the epidemic. Their lives changed in unimaginable ways when their beloved city changed from a hotbed of sexual freedom and social experimentation into the epicenter of a terrible sexually transmitted plague. From their different vantage points as caregivers, activists, researchers, friends and lovers of the afflicted, and as people with AIDS themselves, the interviewees share stories which are not only intensely personal, but which also illuminate the much larger themes of that era: the political and sexual complexities, the terrible emotional toll, and the role of women – particularly lesbians – in caring for and fighting for their gay brothers.

Archival imagery conveys an unusually personal and elegiac sense of San Francisco in the pre-AIDS years, and provides a window into the compassionate and courageous community response to the suffering and loss that followed. And it also conveys in a very visceral sense the horrors of the disease itself.

The year 2011 marked 30 years since AIDS descended. Like an unrelenting hurricane, the epidemic roiled San Francisco for two decades and only began granting some reprieve with medical advancements in the late 1990s. The death years of AIDS left the city ravaged and exhausted, yet, as in most of the developed world, the worst seems past. Though thousands are still living with HIV, and new infections continue at an alarming rate, the relentless suffering of the 1980s and 1990s has given way to a kind of calm, and, understandably, a degree of willful forgetfulness. Intimate and epic, *We Were Here* utilizes San Francisco's experience with AIDS to open up an overdue conversation about both the history of the epidemic and the lessons to be learned from it.

To learn more about the film, visit the companion website for *We Were Here* at <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/we-were-here>. Get detailed information on the film, watch preview clips, read an interview with the filmmaker, and explore the subject in depth with links and resources. The site also features a Talkback section where viewers can share their ideas and opinions.

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About the Participants

Ed Wolf is still doing education and activism around AIDS, both domestically and internationally.

Paul Boneberg is the Executive Director of the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco.

Eileen Glutzer is still involved in clinical research at Quest Clinical Research in San Francisco.

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Daniel Goldstein is creating extraordinary artwork.

Guy Clark is still selling flowers and holding court at 15th and Noe Streets in San Francisco's Castro District.

About the Filmmakers

David Weissman (Producer/Director) moved to San Francisco in 1976. A long-haired refugee from the rapidly gentrifying bohemian enclave of Venice Beach, CA, David was elated to find himself in such a beautiful city overflowing with activists, artists, performers, poets, hippies, drag queens, and Deadheads. There were rebels and dreamers of every variety, thousands of whom were gays and lesbians, creating what was often referred to as the "Gay Mecca." David remembers the thrill of being at Harvey Milk's camera store on the night of his election, and at the victory party for the "No on 6" campaign – the first major electoral victory for the emerging gay movement. Devastated by Harvey's assassination just weeks later, David became more active in local politics, working on political campaigns and as a legislative assistant to San Francisco Supervisor Harry Britt.

In 1981 David began taking filmmaking courses at City College of San Francisco, in a film department a bit larger than a broom closet, with a great collection of instructors. He began making offbeat comedies, usually with some kind of provocative or political edge, and found that he loved the medium, the process, and the opportunity to communicate with a large audience.

For years David made short films, which screened widely in festivals around the world. He also worked on other people's films (*Crumb*, *In The Shadow of the Stars*) and taught a variety of filmmaking classes here and there. As people began to die of AIDS in the early and mid-1980s, this began to affect the content of David's films, particularly in the short film *Song from an Angel*, which featured San Francisco performer Rodney Price doing a song and tap dance about his own death, two weeks before he died of AIDS.

In 1990 David was the first recipient of the Sundance Institute's Mark Silverman Fellowship for New Producers, which included a four-month producing internship on Joel and Ethan Coen's *Barton Fink*.

In the mid-1990s David became interested in HIV prevention policy, and independently produced a groundbreaking series of Public Service Announcements that specifically addressed the complex emotional and psychological stresses facing HIV-negative gay men living in the midst of the epidemic.

In 1998 David teamed up with his friend Bill Weber to co-direct the feature-length documentary *The Cockettes*. After a 2002 Sundance premiere and theatrical and broadcast release, *The Cockettes* received the Los Angeles Film Critics Award for Best Non-Fiction Film. The Weissman/Weber team reunited in 2008 to begin work on *We Were Here*.

Bill Weber (Editor/Co-Director) shifted into documentaries after more than 20 years as a high-end editor of groundbreaking commercials and music videos. Beginning with *The Cockettes* (co-

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director/editor), Bill's documentary credits include the HBO films *Last Letters Home* (Emmy® Award-nominated), *The Final Inch* (Academy Award-nominated), and *The Alzheimer's Project*. Bill also edited the 2007 documentary feature *Hats Off*, and, for The History Channel, Bill edited *Sex In 69* and the Emmy® Award-winning *Gold Rush*.

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about unique individuals, communities, and moments in history. Presented by the Independent Television Service (ITVS), the series is supported by interactive companion websites and national publicity and community engagement campaigns. *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts. The series producer is Lois Vossen.

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