In the early 1980s, same-gender sexual relationships were still illegal in most states and the stigma of homosexuality was so strong that very few people would risk being openly gay. It was in this hostile climate that an unknown, unnamed disease began spreading across the United States. Many of the early victims of the disease were homosexual men, and as a result, the disease became associated with the gay community. In fact, doctors and scientists incorrectly labeled the condition *gay-related immune deficiency* (or GRID) and the public called this devastating and mysterious disease “gay cancer.”

Even after the disease was renamed AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) and the National Cancer Institute found the cause of the disease and confirmed that it was not a “gay” illness, the stigma from those early days of the AIDS crisis lingered. Many believed that homosexuality was immoral and that this disease was a divine punishment. The shame and fear associated with the illness often isolated the victims and survivors and had a devastating impact on their relationships with their partners, friends, families and the broader community. This stigma and fear-mongering continue to affect the LGTBQI community today: a common misperception among LGTBQI youth is that their sexual orientation means that they will become HIV positive at some point in their lives, which is false.

Additional resources on the AIDS Crisis:

• American Historical Association: “Silence = Death: It’s Time to Teach AIDS History”

• AVERT: “History of HIV and AIDS Overview”
  https://www.avert.org/professionals/history-hiv-aids/overview

• HIV.gov: “A Timeline of HIV/AIDS”