

## Tell us six things about your book . . .

### **When did you first get the idea to write this book?**

I first thought about writing a book focused on gay men's resilience in 2012. It grew out of my efforts to understand my own resilience, how it is that I have managed to stay not only sane but also hopeful and optimistic in spite of the many traumatic experiences I've had in my life. My 2005 HIV diagnosis was the most traumatic of all. I wanted to write something positive and inspiring, a book that would flip the "victim" narrative on its head and celebrate gay men's courage, resilience, and strength.

### **How do you manage to write about something as heavy as AIDS, as light as disco and dance music, as sweet and innocent as a children's book about a runaway cow, and now a book about gay men's resilience?**

As I see it, each one of these books comes from the same place in my own heart, soul, and personal experience. Writing about AIDS in *Victory Deferred*, I was doing what I was trained as a journalist to do: Report and document events and people's actions. The fact that I am a gay man who lost so many friends and colleagues certainly shaped my point of view and made the work personally important for me.

I wrote about disco and dance music in *Hot Stuff* because, as it did in the 1970s disco craze, dance music has a way of lifting us out of our worries and reminding us to celebrate life's good times even in the midst of our hard times.

My children's book, *Wilhelmina Goes Wandering*, which I call "a fable for kids ages 5 to 105," is the book of mine I love best because it comes from a deep place in my heart. It's based on the true story of a cow in Connecticut who traveled for five months with a herd of deer before she was finally captured and relocated to an animal sanctuary. I saw in the true story the tale of someone on her own finding acceptance and love in spite of her "difference" from the others. It's a very "human" story, and those of us who leave where we started in life to find our own place of acceptance and belonging know it well.

Finally, *Stonewall Strong* grows out of my efforts to understand my own ability to be resilient in the face of devastating trauma and loss—and discovering in the process that most gay men are in fact extremely courageous, resilient, and strong. I want to help gay men understand and embrace that about themselves, and for non-gay people to understand what they can learn from us to support them in their own lives.



**What's the most surprising thing you learned while writing *Stonewall Strong*?**

I wasn't surprised to learn that the vast majority of gay men are extremely resilient, and manage to live healthy and productive lives in spite of the traumas they experience. But I was shocked—really horrified and saddened—to learn that nearly half of gay men are sexually abused as children, and an even higher proportion of African-American and Latino gay men. It is well known in behavioral science that people who are sexually abused as children frequently grow up to become promiscuous, abuse substances, and engage in high-risk behavior. Shame from the abuse damages their/our self-esteem and undermines their good judgment. It's not surprising that gay men who are sexually abused as children are at extremely high risk for HIV, substance abuse, and partner violence—three of the most pernicious problems that afflict gay men far out of proportion to our small percentage of the population.

**In what way is the book you wrote different from the book you set out to write?**

One way the final book is different from my original vision is that the opening part—part one of four parts, 10 of the 26 chapters—takes up more space than I expected it to. I realized I could offer examples from my own life to provide real-life firsthand experiences of what Dr. Ron Stall, director of the University of Pittsburgh's LGBT Research Center, calls “syndemics”—mental health challenges such as anxiety or depression—in undermining our ability to make healthy choices, at least sometimes.

Part One, called “Growing Strong at My Broken Places,” is a series of stories from my own life in which I draw from the journals I have kept since 1980, the year I graduated from college. I write about the traumas of my life—the loss of loved ones including my father, “second mother” and best friend to cancer, and many friends and a special love to AIDS. It was excruciatingly painful at times to revisit these very hard times in my life.

I write frankly about my own promiscuity, and tease out the forces that seemed to drive my sexual choices, including shame and loss. In our gay community there has been an attitude toward promiscuity and drug use that not only tolerates, but celebrates, them as somehow being “gay birthrights.” I would suggest instead that we should consider celebrating our shared history of courage and resilience in the face of oppression, and the amazing cultural contributions we make in the world because of our “difference.” Instead of celebrating our “right” to be promiscuous (and I realize that for many gay men, this is an unpopular “non-PC” word), why not focus on our ability to love one another and build a strong community together?



**Who is a creative person (not a writer) who has influenced you and your work?**

I am really happy to have been able to share Rich Rasi's story in the book, writing about his experience as a young Catholic priest who was also a psychologist at Boston College in the early 1980s, when he knew that to be honest with himself and everyone else he had to choose to come out as a gay man.

Rich was a very close friend of mine for more than 20 years before he died in 2002. Rich introduced me to the concept of "adult children of alcoholics" and Al-Anon, the 12-step program for people affected by someone else's alcoholism. For me that someone was my father.

Rich was a constant source of encouragement, telling me, "Trust your gut"—the very thing I was conditioned not to do growing up in my dysfunctional family.

He also told me "Claim your expertise," helping me to understand that doing something like immersing myself in the research literature and interviewing nearly 100 people for *Stonewall Strong* qualifies me as an expert on my subject. Rich was a huge influence on me, and I still miss him very much after all these years.

**Persuade someone to read *Stonewall Strong* in 50 words or less.**

*Stonewall Strong* will move and inspire you with its stories of courage, humor, integrity, love, and survival, knitted together with scientific research, in twenty-six easily digestible chapters. You will celebrate with me what I call "gay men's heroic fight for resilience, good health, and a strong community."