

Sasha Alyson: publisher turned activist

The publication of You CAN Do Something About AIDS marked the first time the publishing industry banded together for a cause — and the first time the publishing industry ever did a book for free

BY DELL RICHARDS

This year, Sasha Alyson had two booths at the American Booksellers Association Convention in Anaheim, California, making him the envy of his competitors.

One was for the gay books he publishes. The other was for the book on AIDS he had just organized the publishing industry to produce, featuring articles by Hollywood movie stars,

Books

administration officials, lawmakers, people with AIDS and national commentators.

The book, *You CAN Do Something About AIDS*, marked the first time the publishing industry banded together for a cause — and the first time the publishing industry ever did a book for free.

"This is the first time anyone ever heard of a book being given away free," said Alyson, founder of Alyson Publications.

Alyson, 36, got the idea a year ago when someone at the 1987 ABA convention asked him what they could do about AIDS.

"I looked at the statistics — how many people were likely to be infected with the AIDS virus — and realized that I would never be able to forgive myself if I didn't do absolutely everything I could," he said.

The culmination of a year's worth of struggle, the book is being given away to Book-of-the-Month Club members and at all Walden's and B. Dalton bookstores starting in June.

To make copies of the 126-page book available cost the publishing industry more than \$200,000.

Unlike Alyson's other books — which are gay — *You CAN Do* isn't written for a gay audience. Instead, it brings AIDS awareness out of the closet and into middle-class American homes.

"I directed the book at mainstream America because I feel that most gay people already have a good sense of what they can do about AIDS," said Alyson.

"But many people who don't feel at risk are starting to feel its impact and want to do something. This book is a way to put that energy to use."

The ABA booth stressed the mainstream nature of the venture. Along the back, there were photos of Elizabeth Taylor, Whoopi Goldberg and Abigail "Dear Abby" Van Buren — celebrities who wrote chapters and lent their name to the book.

Rep. Gerry Studds (D-Mass.) — one of the few openly gay members of Congress — and world-famous fashion model Beverly Johnson were on hand for the press conference.

The book already is a tremendous success. Many bookstores went through the shipment in the first day, and booksellers from Nevada to New York are talking about it at the ABA convention.

Which isn't surprising.

Its first printing was massive. Most books are lucky to get a 10,000-book run, but *You CAN Do* started with 325,000 copies, including 175,000 copies for Book-of-the-Month Club members. Its second printing was another 250,000. A third run is in the planning stage, and Alyson hopes to keep going as long as there is a demand. But he has other motives than just publishing a book on AIDS.

"I'm hoping people who are concerned will get involved. That way we can avoid what I call the 'disease-of-the-year syndrome,'" said Alyson. "One year it's Alzheimer's disease, another disease next year."

"I think that once people get involved while the attention is on it, they'll stay involved. They'll keep calling their legislators and volunteering for the hotlines."

When Alyson was asked "What can we do about AIDS?" he began to wonder what the publishing industry could do — given its unique ability to generate publicity.

"I thought there must be something we could do to take advantage of our specific communications skills and abilities," he said.

Generating enthusiasm was easy, but getting a firm commitment was slow going.

"Individuals within most companies were great, but the executives themselves said 'A free book? You want us to pay?'"

Although people in the industry could see the significant public-relations value of a free educational book about AIDS, "most of them didn't do it for that reason — they did it because they thought it was important," said Alyson.

Publishers were interested, but most adopted a wait-and-see attitude. They weren't willing to commit until it got off the ground.

That's when Alyson turned to friend Gerry Studds.

"He made a lot of phone calls to people he didn't know at all," said Alyson. "And they'll return calls to a congressman when they won't return calls to Sasha Alyson."

Studds used his influence to get publishers and celebrities alike involved in the project. In addition, he talked Hollywood movie star Elizabeth Taylor into writing the introduction. By using his name, Studds gave the project tremendous credibility.

Once the book captured the support of celebrities and lawmakers, the publishing industry was ready to jump on the bandwagon.

Book-of-the-Month Club pledged \$10,000 and financed 40 percent of the first 100,000 copies. Ingram Book Co. (a major distributor), Bantam, Random House, Simon & Schuster, Waldenbooks, Harper & Row, Viking, McGraw-Hill, Morrow and New American Library — all the majors and many independents — contributed to the effort.

"There's no way to find out for absolute sure — there are no reference books — but no one knows of anything even remotely similar," said Alyson.

But it's not his first such triumph since he founded Alyson Publications in 1977. He roused the gay community to send back Visa charge cards to protest Visa's Olympic contributions. He donated one-third of Alyson's monthly income to AIDS research and started a pen-pal organization for gay teens.

Alyson's mobilization of the gay community has resulted in nearly 1,500 Visa cards being returned to his office. He thinks the impact has been much greater — that many more people sent their cards directly to Visa.

"Hundreds of thousands — if not millions — of gay people have seen the name 'Visa' in a very negative context," he said.

"Other people are applying for MasterCard."

Working Assets, a firm that only offered Visa, decided to offer MasterCard as well. It also made a \$1,000 donation each to three gay organizations as a direct result of the controversy.

Although Alyson believes in being involved as an individual, he also gets his business involved. This year, Alyson Publications donated all of March's gross receipts from mail

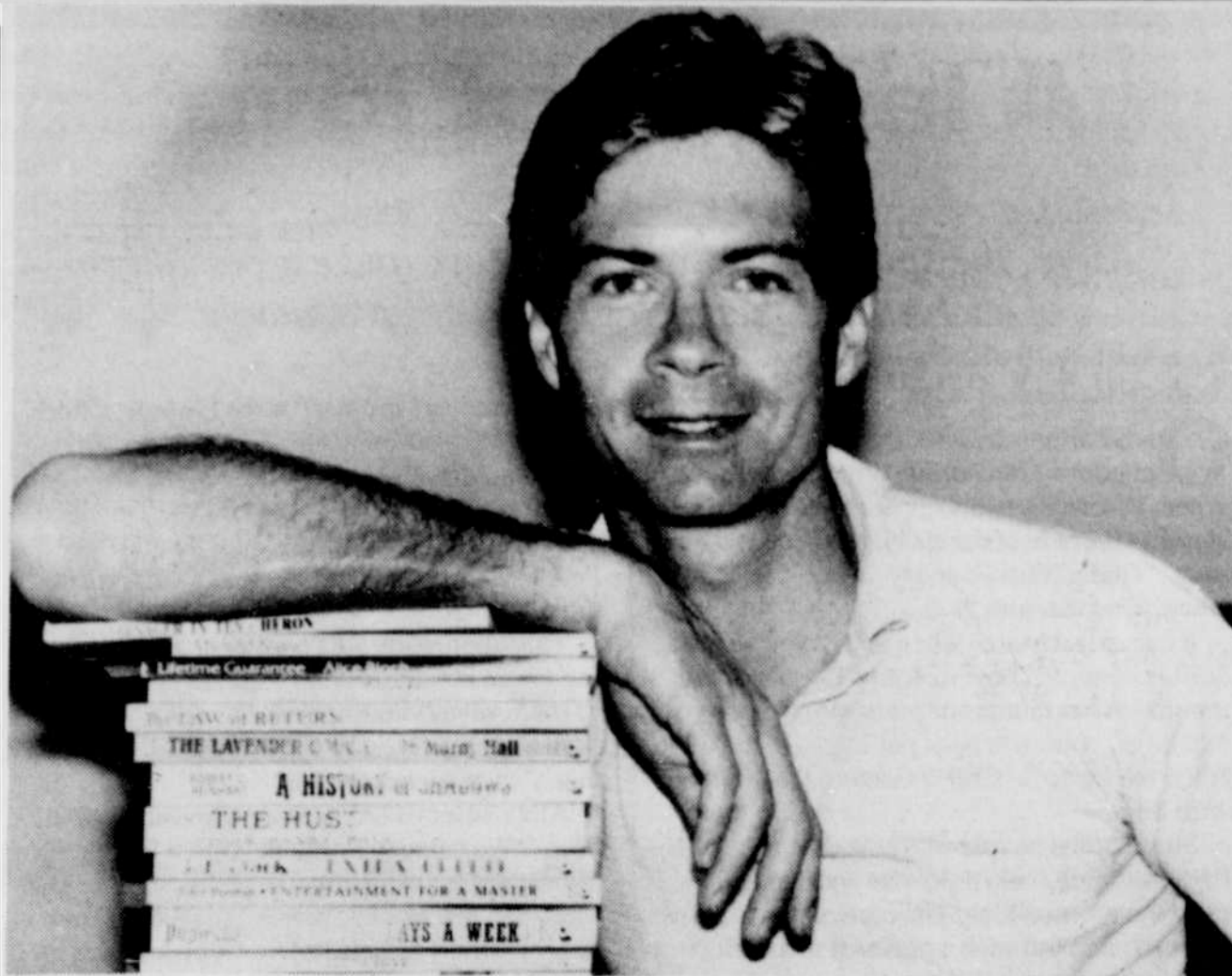


photo by Dell Richards

order — \$5,000 — to AIDS research.

"I've often contributed to an AIDS benefit only to find out that a disappointingly small percentage went toward AIDS work," said Sasha.

And he remembers what it was like when he was young — when he thought he was the only gay person in the world. In 1982, he started a free pen-pal service for gay teens that is now used by 3,000 teens.

With 120 titles under his belt, Alyson isn't about to stop publishing. The press is doing so well that he can spend more time looking for authors to write the nonfiction books he'd like to print.

"In the past couple years, I've had the time to sit back and look at what I think we should be

doing," he said. "When I was much busier, it was a case of just selecting from the manuscripts that came in."

The publishing house is planning books on Leonard Matlovich, who was thrown out of the military for being gay, and Harry Hay, a gay rights pioneer who was thrown out of the Communist Party in the 1930s because of his sexuality.

Over the years, as the press has made enough money to sustain itself, Alyson has been able to give more time and energy to being an activist and to one-time projects like the AIDS book.

"I do think I might live to see the day where nobody attaches any real significance to whether you're gay or straight or what," he said.

But until then, he plans to keep pushing. ●

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