

Unaffected

AIDS activist Mark Harrington nabs 'genius award,'
but it hasn't turned his head

by Bob Roehr

The call came as a complete surprise. "I got it on Thursday," says AIDS activist Mark Harrington. "Would I accept a MacArthur Fellowship? What was I supposed to say? No, I won't take your money? Or, I can't take it for the next five years even if it is unrestricted, I'm too busy?"

The fellowship program began in 1981 and was quickly dubbed the "genius award" by the public. It is a "no strings attached" five-year grant that "means to honor creative people everywhere," says MacArthur Foundation president Adele Simmons.

Harrington was selected for his work as "a writer, researcher and activist who has not only advanced our knowledge of AIDS treatments but has also inspired new understandings in the roles that ordinary citizens can play in facilitating scientific work...[and] for reforms in the methodology of drug testing."

The process of choosing fellows is guarded and secretive. What we do know, however, is that each year 125 people are asked to serve as "talent scouts" and submit nominees for the program.

An anonymous panel of a dozen sifts through the nominations and makes its recommendations to the foundation's board.

This year 23 fellows were tapped—their names unveiled June 16.

Each will receive *Mark Harrington*

a quarterly stipend for the next five years. Dollar amounts are geared to age; Harrington, 37, will receive a total of \$240,000.

Mark Harrington didn't set out to be an AIDS activist. The San Francisco native traveled to Harvard to study humanities, then worked as a waiter.

But later, living in New York City, he was swept up "in that great first wave in 1988" when hundreds of people were joining ACT UP.

"A friend of mine developed ARC. Remember ARC? He was 28 and didn't have a job, didn't have insurance, didn't have an apartment. I could so easily imagine myself in his shoes," Harrington recalls.

In a matter of months Harrington was working on a planned action at the federal Food and Drug Administration.

"It just dragged me in. I found out this is what I was going to be doing with my life," says Harrington, who squeezed in some freelance writing to pay the bills.

A major turning point came in 1989, "when they cut off access to ganciclovir and they made people go on this placebo trial," he says.

ACT UP zapped the FDA and within a month the policy was reversed.

"We started getting letters from all over the country that said, 'Thanks, ACT UP, you saved my eyesight,'" says Harrington. "It felt so tangible—like there could be nothing more rewarding than doing things that would help people stay alive or keep their vision."

It also steered him for the next crisis, when his lover took sick and died of AIDS and Harrington himself tested positive for HIV. "Those were dark days," he says.

Harrington is a founding member of the Treatment Action Group, which split off from ACT UP-New York in 1992.

He and Greg Gonsalves wrote a report on reforming AIDS research at the National Institutes of Health that led to creation of the Office of AIDS Research.

Harrington became a consultant and sat on the advisory body that created the soon-to-be-released federal guidelines for standards of care for HIV.

In July, he will serve as a public member on the FDA panel that will rewrite drug clinical trial and approval guidelines based on RNA viral load standards.

"We just kept on trucking, and it turns out that all of that stuff really paid off last year," he sighs with contentment. "My support group has been meeting for seven years, now five of the six are undetect-

able and the sixth hasn't started yet [on protease inhibitors]. We all have a new lease on life, and we have to figure out what we are going to do with it."

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases, calls Harrington "a classic example of someone able to make the transition from the provocative activism that gains attention to becoming enough of an expert in the field [to get] a justified seat at the table, as opposed to a token seat at the table."

Harrington maintains the award won't affect his life much, and vows to "keep on doing my AIDS work."

That includes "keeping the pipeline full so that when people wear out drugs, there will be new ones."

He also hopes to try "to get a global solution and not just an expensive high-tech combination-therapy solution which is only going to be accessible in the developed world."

Harrington also admits he may take some time off to finish his book on the first 10 years of AIDS activism "and buy some bookshelves, practical things."

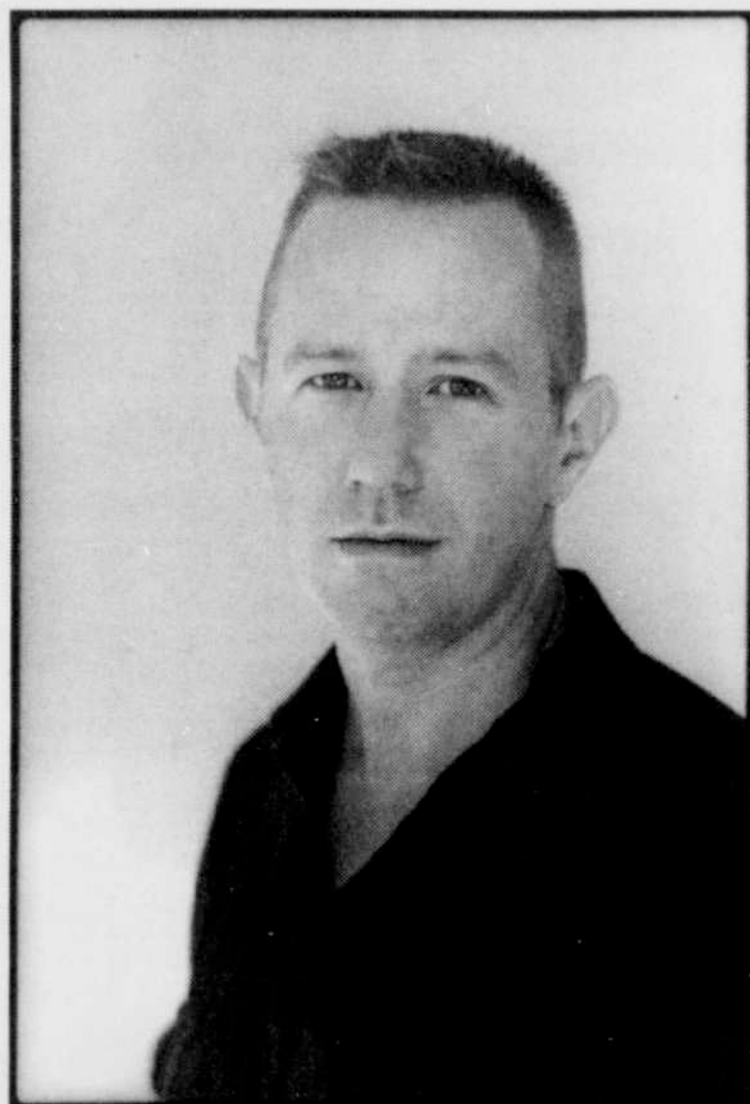
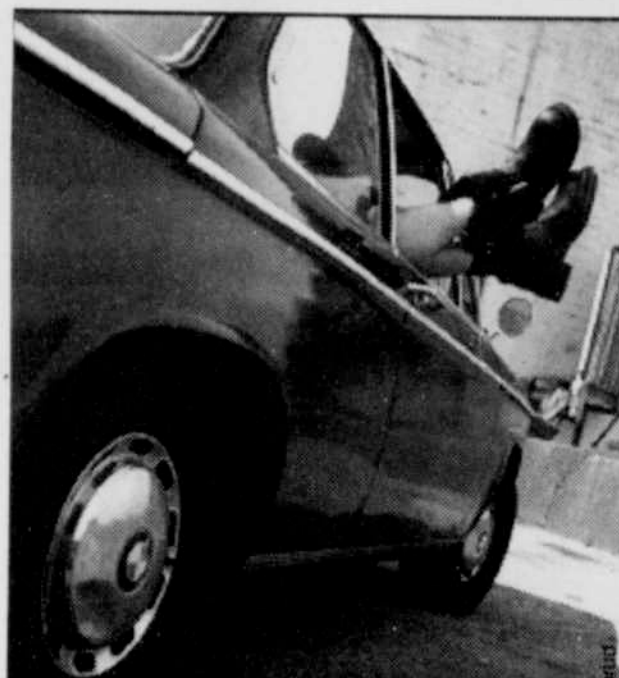


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