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world news

A friend is lost

Queers worldwide mourn the death of a woman who embraced people with AIDS and 'radiated love to those in need'

by Rex Wockner

Many gay men and lesbians are inconsolable over the death of Princess Diana, given her devotion to people with AIDS and her outwardly fabulous lifestyle.

"Diana's impact upon the lesbian and gay world is almost without parallel," said Paul Clements, editor of the *Pink Paper*, a London gay weekly. "She single-handedly destigmatized HIV when she opened Britain's first HIV ward in 1987, and was supportive to the core."

"The only time I felt so moved by somebody's death was with [Queen's lead singer] Freddie Mercury," Paul, 42, told Agence France-Press as he sat in a cafe in central London's Soho district.

"I felt tears coming to my eyes," added a 27-year-old patron at the Soho gay pub Compton's. "I had to wake everyone up in the house and go in to their bedrooms and hold them."

Compton's was closed for Diana's funeral on Sept. 6. The huge disco GAY observed a minute of silence in honor of "the fairy tale princess." Local gay groups staged candlelight vigils in several cities.

"What she did for AIDS victims in those days by shaking hands with them when everyone daren't touch them in case they were affected by AIDS, it was fantastic," another gay pub crawler, John, told Agence France-Press. "She showed people there was nothing to worry about...the straight population in Britain would like to play down the fact that 50 percent of her charity work was involved with gays."

The princess was known to visit AIDS patients at London Lighthouse in the middle of the night in order to elude photographers.



Princess Diana

"HIV does not make people dangerous to know, so you can shake their hands and give them a hug. Heaven knows they need it," she said in one 1991 speech.

"Princess Diana set a wonderful example for all of us by her concern for the poor, the oppressed, the hurting and the sick," the Rev. Billy Graham said in the United States. "[She] was one of our first public figures to...hold a man with AIDS."

"With one royal handshake given to a young man with AIDS in the late 1980s, Diana forever changed the face of AIDS for the world," added David Harvey, executive director of the U.S. National AIDS Policy Center for Children, Youth and Families.

In San Francisco, more than 10,000 mourners staged a candlelight march from the gay and lesbian Castro district to the British consulate on the eve of the funeral.

In Budapest, Hungary, 500 gay people gathered at Vorsomart Square to honor the princess. News agencies said it was the city's first gay and lesbian public event.

"We...cherish her memory because we also

were embraced in her love," gay activist Balazs Palfy told the crowd. "Let us bow our heads to pay tribute to a great woman...who died senselessly after a meaningful life radiating love to those in need of it."

Palfy also said Hungarian gay men and lesbians should "declare we exist and want to start normal communications with the rest of society."

Hundreds of other tributes to Diana took place around the globe.

"She was in so many ways a mirror of our own humanity writ large, complete with all its paradoxes and contradictions, all its struggle to find meaning in life and to find love, which is perhaps why so many of us thought of her as one of us," said another admirer.

Meanwhile, gay icon Madonna charged that society is to blame for Di's death.

"As much as I want to blame the press, we all have blood on our hands," the pop goddess said. "All of us, even myself, bought those magazines and read them. Until we no longer feel that it is our right to read about people's private lives, and until we lose our fascination with scandal and sensational journalism, we are never going to act. It is all our fault."

"I have been chased through that same tunnel so many times I have lost count," Madonna added. "I felt outraged and helpless... Freedom of the press, yes, I'm all for it. Write whatever you want to write, but you cannot stalk people and take pictures of them inside their bedroom windows, or chase them through towns at 100 miles per hour... [Diana] was caged. The only hope I can see coming from all this... is that now she is free."

Britain's National AIDS Trust is collecting messages of tribute to Diana, which can be mailed to NAT, New City Cloisters, 188-196 Old Street, London, EC1V 9FR, UK, or e-mailed to diana@nat.org.uk.

PHOTO BY TIM GRAHAM—SYGMA