



BUTLER GALLERY

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# Documenting a Pandemic - Gypsy Ray

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In San Francisco during the 1980s and 1990s the photographer Gypsy Ray (1949 – 2020) documented the lives and relationships of people living with HIV/AIDS. These collaborative portraits and the accompanying testimonies of their sitters are not only an extraordinary social record of those times and that epidemic but also of the human capacity to face the daunting challenges of life, of illness and of mortality, of love and of loss; to discover unknown inner strength and the solace of lovers, carers, friends and family. The participants in this series of photographs, on both sides of the camera's lens, show us how, at our shared best, we realise what it is to be human.

## Photographer's Statement

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In 1985 I began a series of photographic portraits of people affected by AIDS: people who have ARC or AIDS, their lovers, friends, families, and health care workers. The photographs are accompanied by statements written by those portrayed. These pictures are collaborations with their subjects. The combinations of my images and their words make the viewer travel between one and the other, hopefully seeing a resonance in their conjunction.

When I decided to begin this series I contacted several AIDS organizations in San Francisco. Hospice became the main organization that I worked with because the people who worked there thought this was a good idea and supported it wholeheartedly. I would call people and tell them about the project: that these were to be portraits with statements, that they could be portrayed wherever and with whom they wished, that I would not edit what they wrote and that they would not sign a release until they had seen the photographs I intended to use, leaving them the option to back out at the last minute. I would then go and work with those who agreed.

When I began this work in 1985 the gay community was hard-hit by AIDS, and I felt it was time for me to give something back to a group which had so greatly contributed to the success of my earlier work, several gay men having worked closely with me as photographic models while I was completing my Masters thesis on the male nude. Over the next three years the virus expanded beyond the bounds of any specific community and my work expanded with it.

Most of this project was accomplished by working through such organizations as the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, VNA/Hospice in San Francisco and the Santa Cruz AIDS/Hospice caring projects. Often the best photographs emerged through working closely with health professionals.

For me this series is complete. The work seems to have a life of its own. It is continually being requested for use by health care organizations and publications and for exhibition in galleries and community centers. I have been both surprised and proud that this work has been so widely used.

## Introduction by Carter Wilson:

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*"I need the love of people"* says Wesley North, one of the men with AIDS in this exhibit.

Who would say different?

I always take pleasure from new "empirical" research demonstrating that stroking, holding and *attention* do the human body good. (The latest showed that premature babies whose little limbs were manipulated 45 minutes a day gained weight faster and left their incubation for home sooner.) Plodding along, science verifies yet another of the common human knowledges.

I continue to believe we all should sing, with Walt Whitman, the body electric. But we must also practice singing the body vulnerable and mortal. The paradox is famous. To have a life, we must each inhabit a body. Yet just as clearly, the physical frame alone is *not* the whole person.

Modern individualists describe the "self" as the total of an individual's actions, including the "cognitive"

and "emotive" processes. What strikes me in the photographs and statements Gypsy Ray has gathered is the re-emergence of an older, better sort of thinking, gained through suffering and courage in the face of death. The people here know they are more than organisms generating ideas and feelings. They recognize themselves as also being the sum of all the care others have had for them, from their small beginnings to today.

The volunteers for the project are not representative of all people with AIDS, their lovers and kin and the health professionals who work with them. These are the teachers, and even in their reassuring presence it is necessary to keep in mind that for many AIDS has been only a chaotic, embittering, lonely struggle. They too continue needing the love of other people in order to complete themselves.

**Carter Wilson, 1986.**



### **Maria & Mark**

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Working with people who have AIDS is bringing me closer to myself. They are allowing me to know who I am, and in that sense, are healing me. Working through their process with them, I work on my own. The only difference between us is gender, sexual orientation, and sometimes age. Yet, we are the same, all participants in the human condition. We laugh, cry, feel pain, fear and loneliness. And we are all dying. The reward comes from the intimacy of being so involved in someone else's life. It is like being a servant in some way, having a tremendous presence in someone else's life that we would not have otherwise. I have to accept the groundlessness of the situation. I am just there, doing it, and in one sense there is no real reason why. Sometimes, just to convey my feelings is enough. Love heals where medicine cannot.



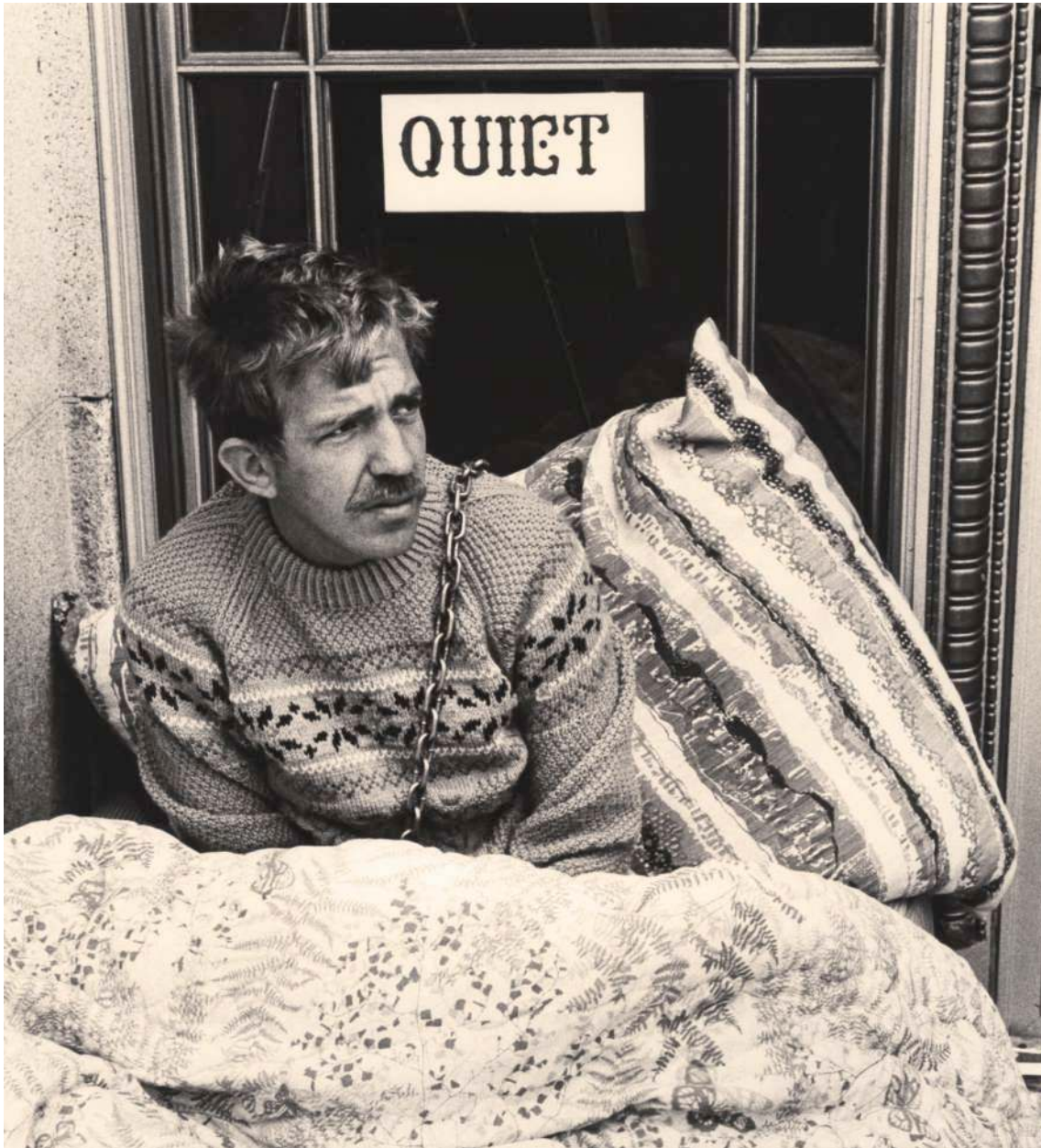
**Gypsy Ray** (1949 - 2020), **Jon & Zenobia**, 1986

### **Jon and Zenobia**

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Caring has taken on a new meaning for me since I started working with the Hospice AIDS program. The closeness I feel with my AIDS clients is touching me in a way I find no words to describe. To be there, when at times that is all one can do other than to assist with basic needs, allows me to stay focused on my purpose for being there. My role requires this focus, along with the realization that to truly care is to allow my clients to remain independent and in control of their lives as they have to live with AIDS. I feel honoured to be able to be part of their lives; to learn from them and feel their caring for me.

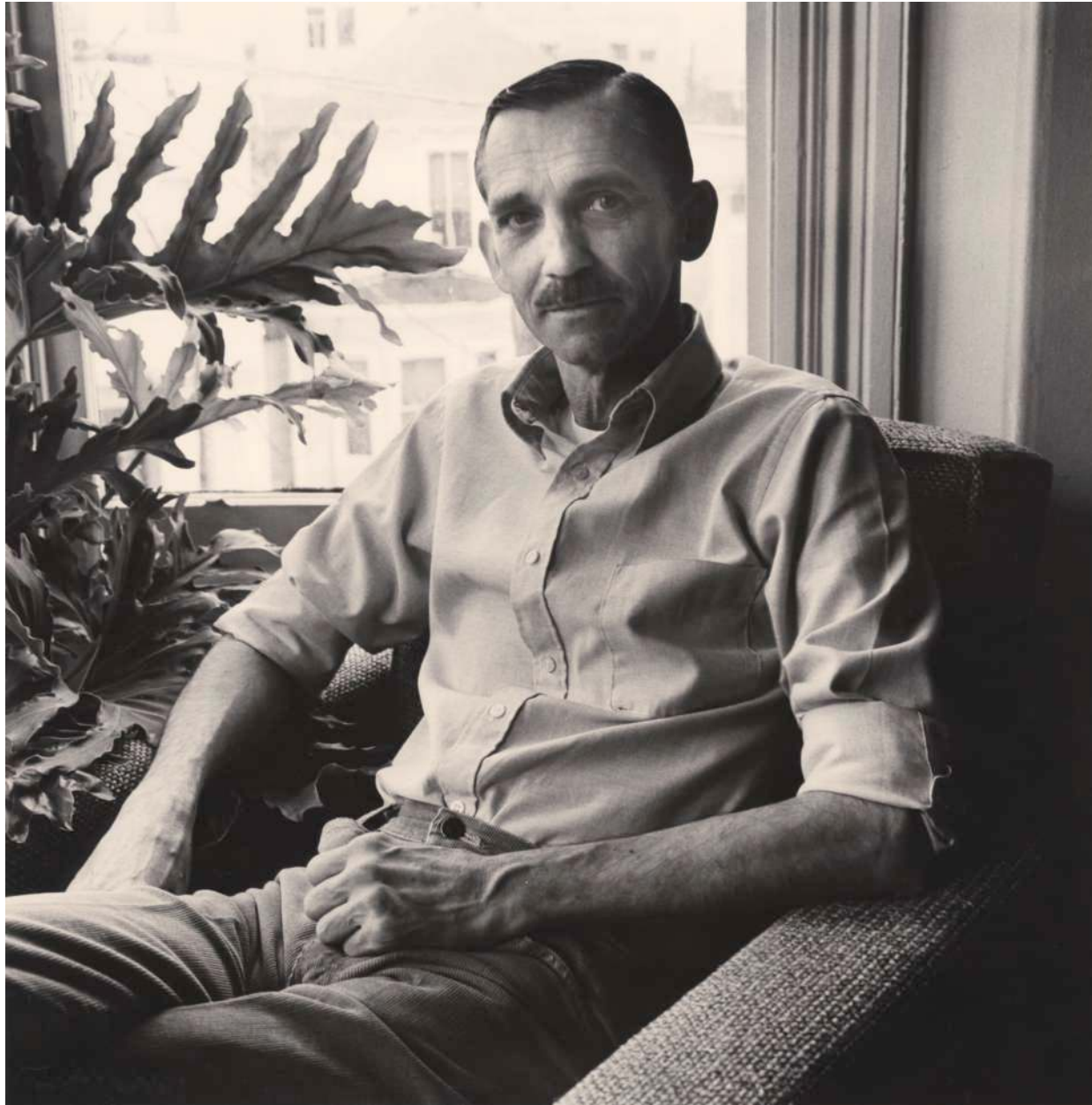
-Zenobia (Jackson)



### Wesley

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My name is Wesley North, 31 years old person with AIDS. I am here at ARC/AIDS vigil. Been out here on and off for 105 days. We appreciate the support of the people but we still need your support. Write us letters especially me. I need the love of people. I would like to hear from people. We need still food and juice. I am out here for my life but I am out here for other people that has not died with AIDS and for the people that has died with AIDS.



**Gene (Eugene) Russell**

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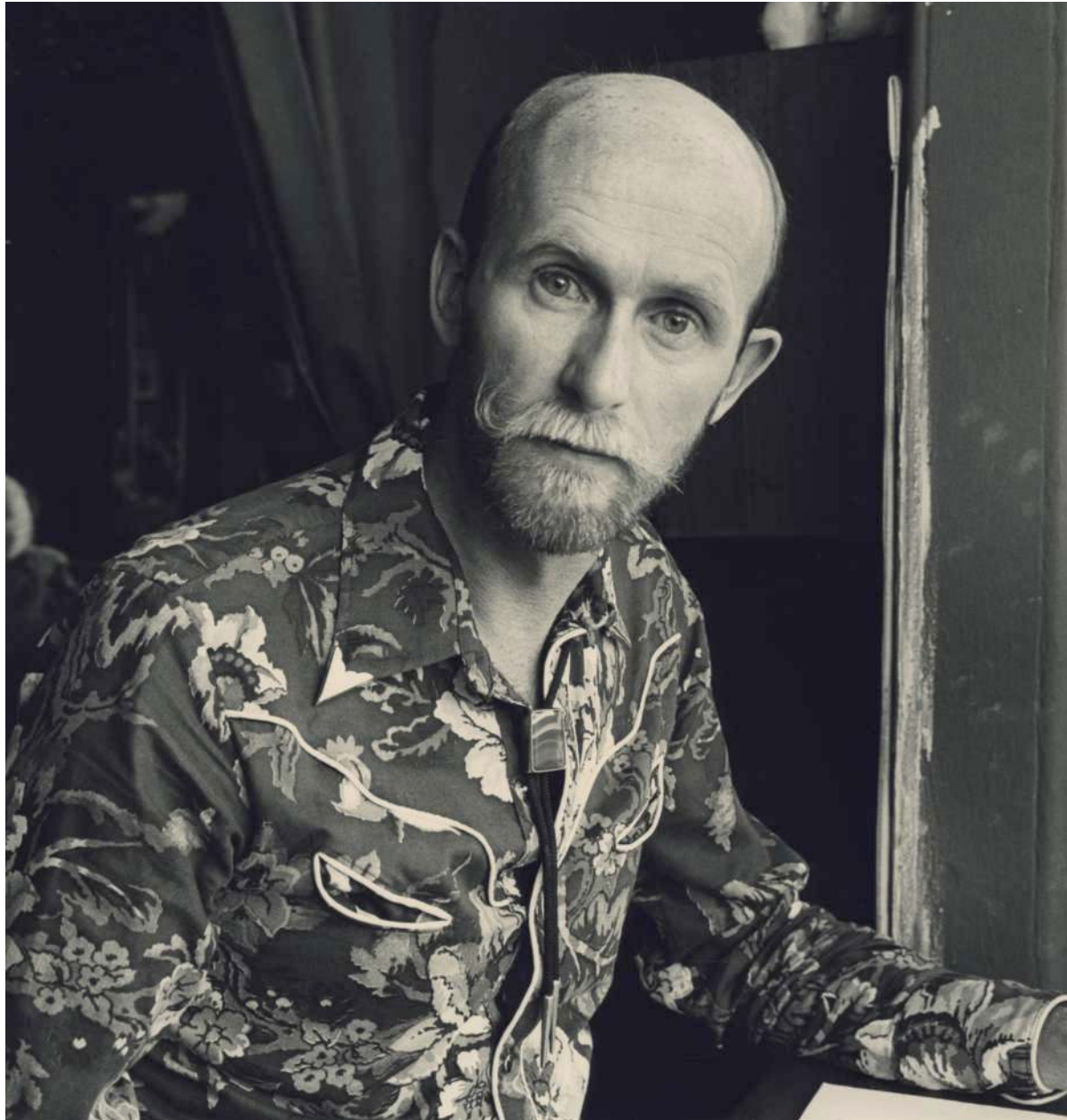
Yesterday is the past, tomorrow is the future,  
and today is mine to live and enjoy.



### Edwina Murphy

My name is Edwina Murphy. I am 43 years old, married, and the mother of six children. I have AIDS. My virus came from a transfusion of Factor V111 due to a bleeding problem. Living with AIDS has made me realize that love, understanding and compassion for those with AIDS is so very important, be it a person like myself to all the others in the high risk groups. I have found many new friends who support and care about people with AIDS. I have had no one turn their back on me. Letting the Lord take over my life and showing me how I can help others has been my greatest strength. I have peace within for the cross I must now carry.





**Gypsy Ray** (1949 - 2020), Ron Carey, 1986

### Ron Carey

I have been living with AIDS for four years and four months. There is a life to live after an AIDS diagnosis. A life that has become more meaningful and fulfilling than ever before. Learning to meet the challenges of AIDS, and learning to reach out to others with compassion and love, have given me a greater sense of myself. I am thankful for the loving support I have received from my family and friends, and all the loving and caring I have received from the San Francisco Gay Community.



**Gypsy Ray** (1949 - 2020), Moss & Robert, 1986

### **Moss and Robert**

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Faggots don't die! You just fuck them and forget their name. We just recycle all the fantasies we get and give.

June 15th 1985, Bob calls. He says, "I have AIDS." Suddenly I hear a clock – like the sound of an old wind-up type – start marking time. Giving me/us a new kind of insomnia. Fearful, that all we have been told about this cancer is true. Fearful, that all we hope for is futile and we should face the truth. ....the truth : "We do die."

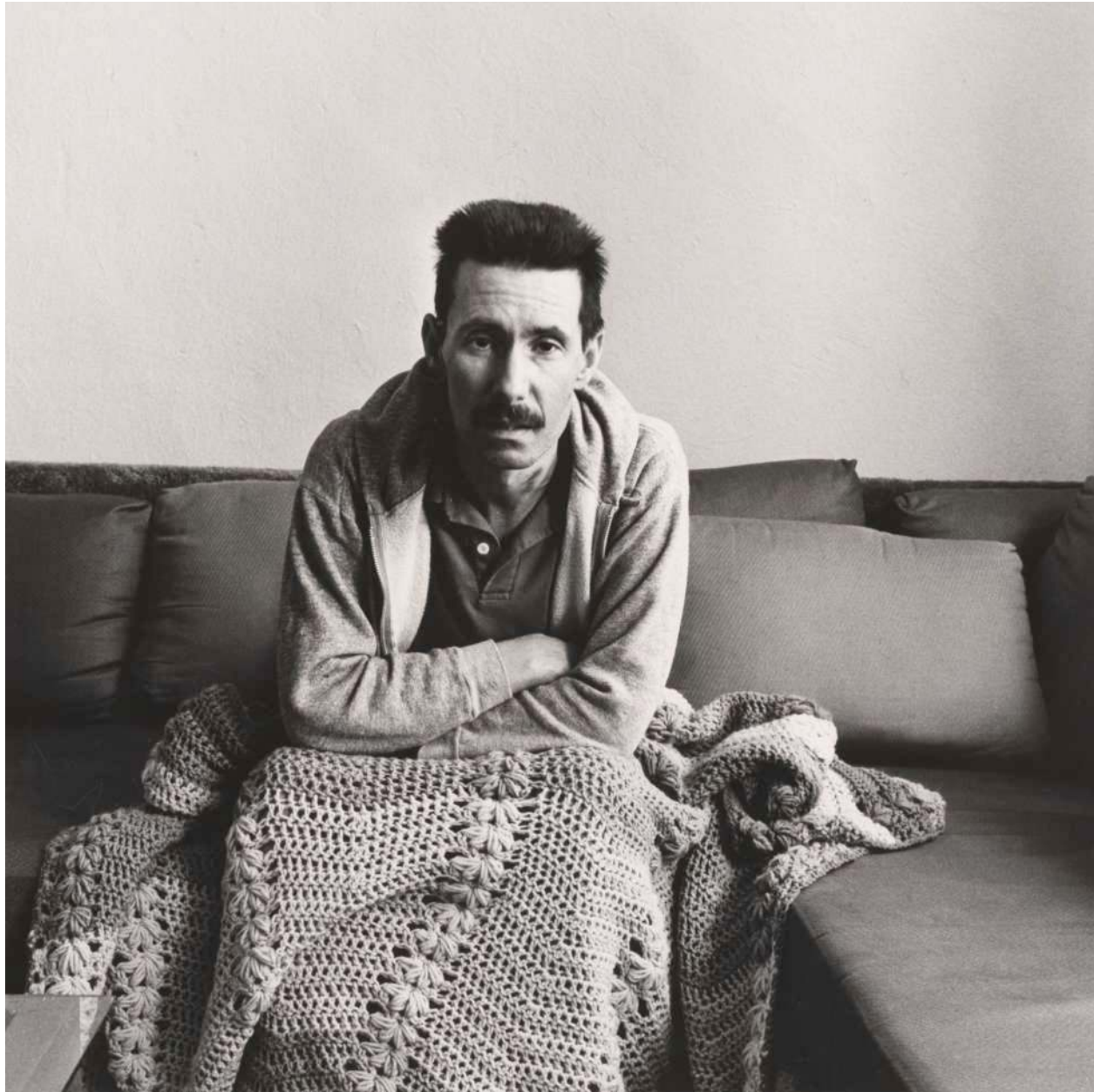


**Gypsy Ray** (1949 - 2020), Stuart, 1986

### **Stuart**

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Are you surprised a person with AIDS looks like this? I am always afraid to make new friends because of the fear of losing them but love normally wins the day.

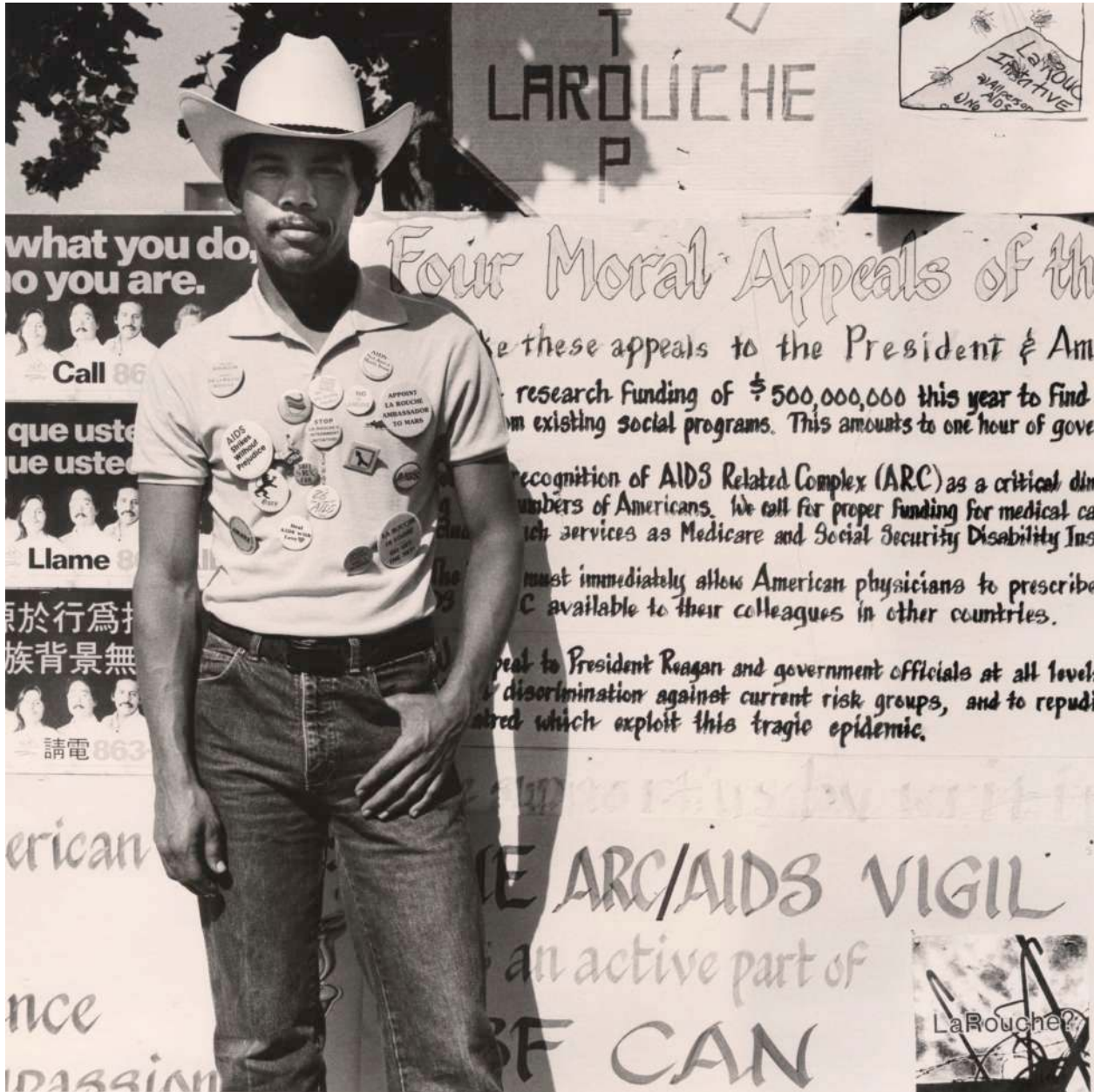


**Gypsy Ray (1949 - 2020), Jon, 1986**

### **Jon Hendu**

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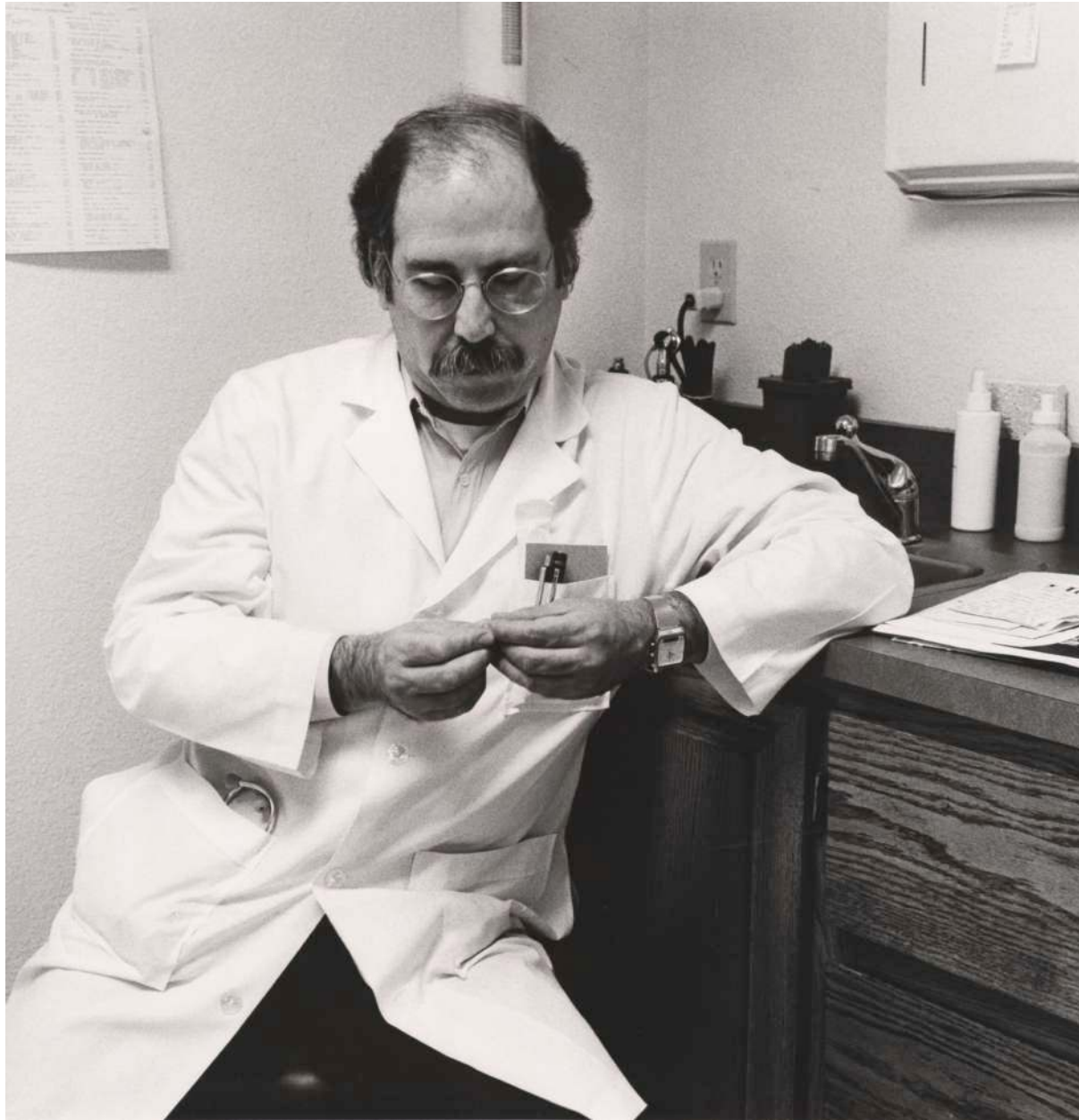
My life is my disease, and vice versa. I have an unwilling pact with it to share my body and thus it has been for two years. Being Romanian/Irish by heritage and ornery by design I seem to be able always to keep a step ahead of where the disease says I should be going; it challenges, I fight back. And so go the days, the ultimate game of push and shove. I'm not winning. I can't win. But I can revel in the friendships that are my solace, my sustenance, and my survival.



Gypsy Ray (1949 - 2020), Gary. ARC/AIDS Vigil, San Francisco, 1986

#### Gary. ARC/AIDS Vigil, San Francisco

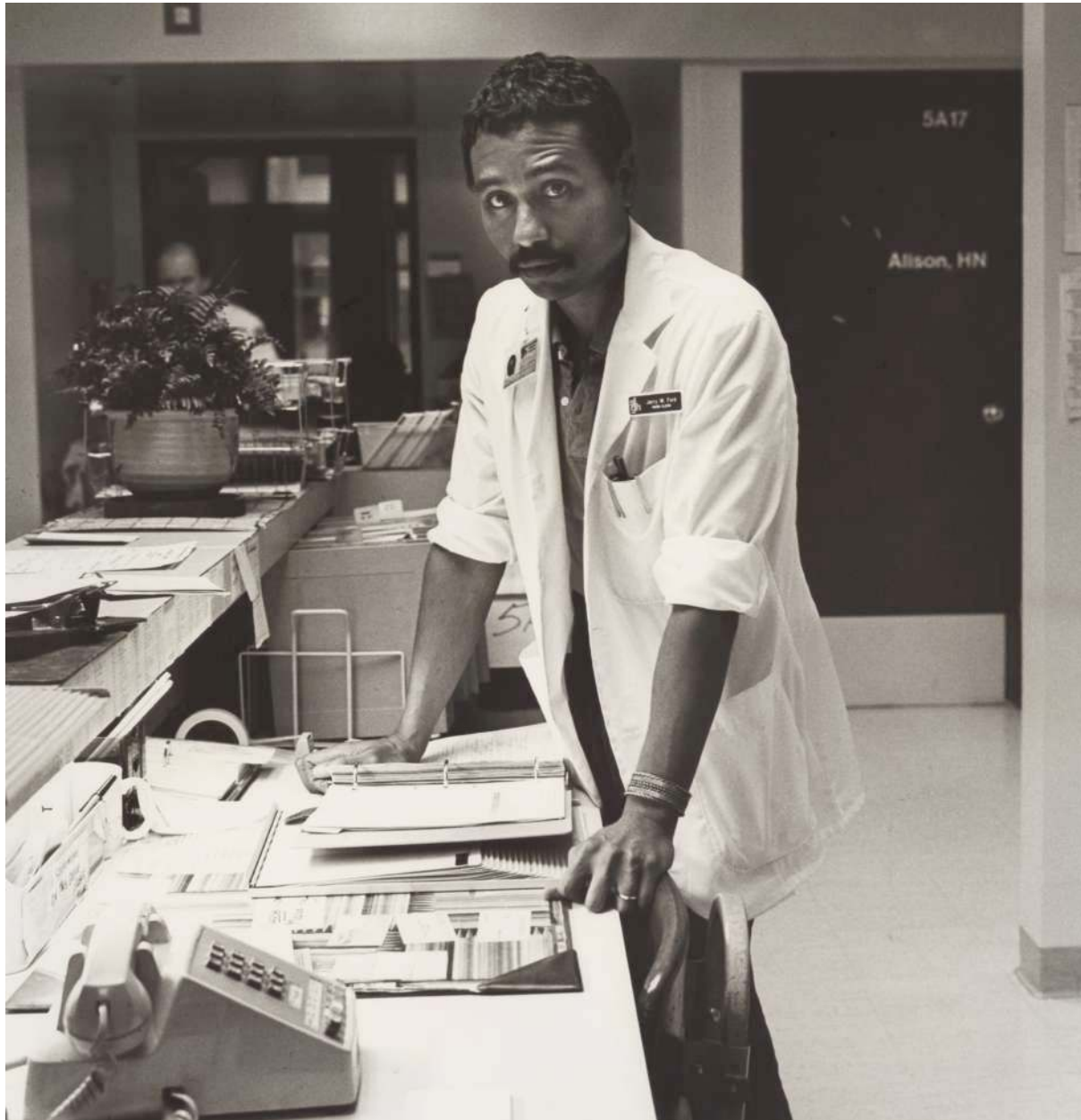
Our philosophy is “get up off your deathbed; stop laying down to die; make active people of yourselves and add time to your lives.”



### Doctor Leff

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Contemplating these times when a submicroscopic organism has humbled our universe. I struggle for the energy to fit the overwhelming needs of AIDS patients into the day-to-day requirements of the heart attacks, pneumonia and earaches. I also struggle with the loneliness and sadness that comes with being a physician to the dying...trying on one hand to be optimistic and hopeful, and on the other hand, watching and participating in the deaths of new-found friends. As I sometimes push back my tears, I can only hope that human compassion and intellect will combine to make AIDS a short-lived tragedy.



#### **Jerry Ford, Unit Clerk, 5A**

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No one who spends time on 5A or who is touched by AIDS remains unchanged, for AIDS challenges our very essence, urging (and sometimes forcing!) us to open the doors to our hearts and souls; doors often long closed. Rarely have I seen such selfless love and caring, often between individuals who do not know one another. Such compassion and sharing attest to the vast depth and beauty of the human spirit. I could never hope to repay what has been given and shown me by people with AIDS except by loving all who come my way with that same selflessness and compassion. In their eyes I have seen and felt a simple beauty and joy of life and I have witnessed a strength flowing from the soul such as I have rarely seen. These are blessings that shall never leave my heart; blessings that enable me to live life and to live love.



### Diane

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In the past four years of working with people with AIDS, I feel like I've experienced the best and worst of humanity. I've had the very precious opportunity to share in rich moments of peoples' (strangers') lives, to feel the strength, courage, love, sorrow and pain that each person dealing with AIDS has to confront – and I've felt enraged at the homophobia and racism that has shaped this government's response to this great tragedy, enraged at its misguided priorities of war that only create more hardship and suffering. Mostly, it's served to keep me well on track, to recommit me to working for a more just society and to begin to get a mere glimpse of understanding of life and death.

- Diane





**Gypsy Ray** (1949 - 2020), **Rachel & Neal**, 1986

### **Rachel and Neal**

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My title gets me in the door. But it is my willingness to relinquish that title, to share – one human being with another – that allows for our mutual healing and transformation.

Neal was a very gracious and courageous person. We laughed together, we cried together, we grew together. He learned, among other things, that it was ok to let go. I learned, among other things, how to compassionately support him in that process.

Fear, separation and even medical technology alone will not adequately respond to the AIDS crisis – or any crisis. Nothing will heal more quickly, more completely, more beautifully, than love.

- Rachel James.



## Dick and Jack

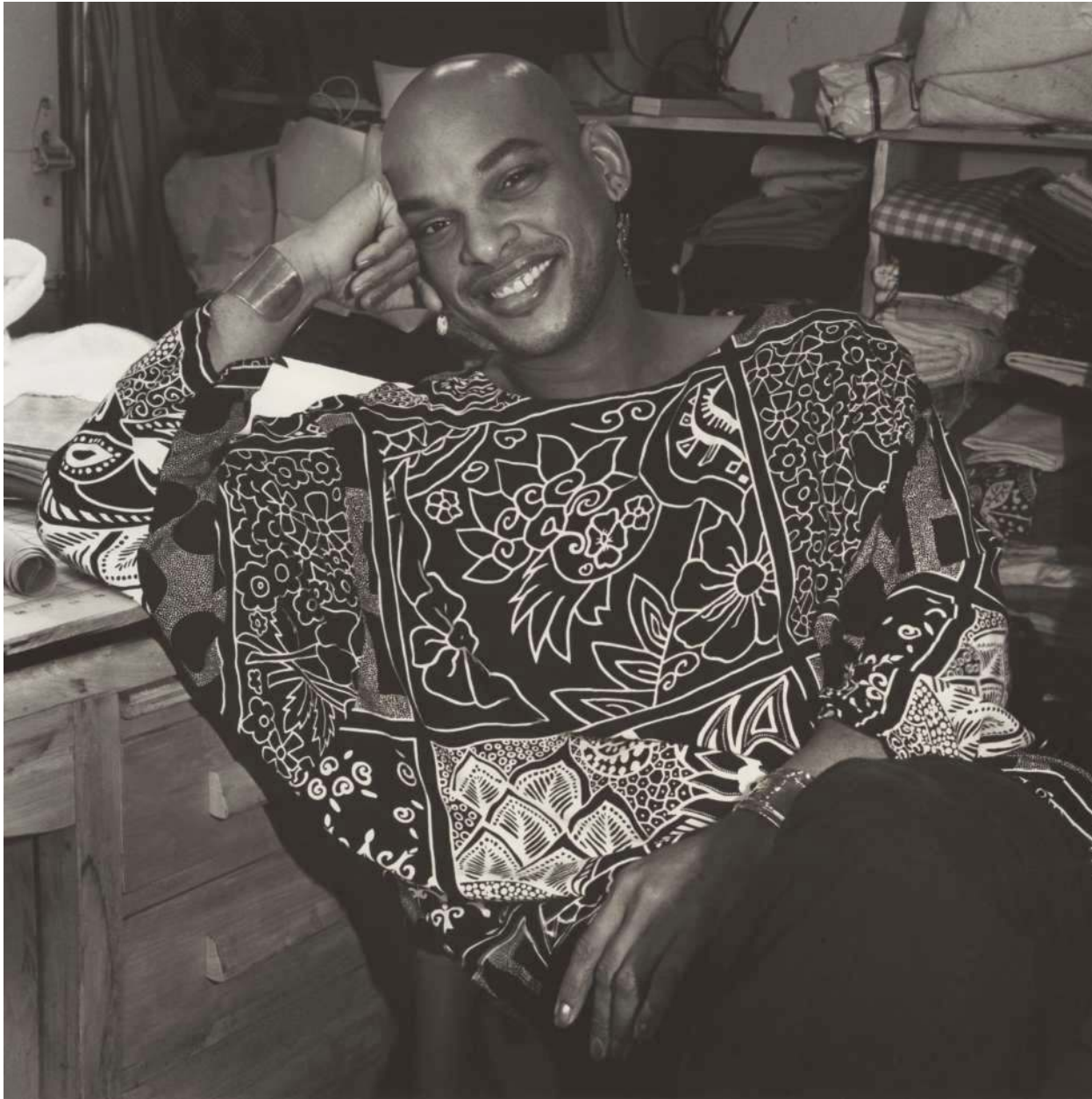
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Here is Jack and here is Dick. Clearly we are in love, and clearly we are lovers, just as we were lovers with David and Charlie who were taken from us by AIDS. There are many in the world who think that the horrible death by AIDS is just retribution for the crime of loving another human being. These same fools would have us believe that some forms of love are licit and others are not. These people are to be pitied, for their ignorance is an ignorance of love. They hate and fear the love they have not experienced in their own hearts. Intrinsic with the act of loving is the knowledge of its own RIGHTNESS.

Think of this picture as a test of your own ability to love. If you are comfortable with the image of two human beings sharing love, it is because you can love. Those who can love are gratified by the love of others for each other, for love must love. If you are not comfortable with this image, we hope it will make you question what there is about YOU that makes our love uncomfortable to you. Our fondest hope is that all our brothers and sisters in the human family can experience the love that we have found in each other and in the love of our gay brothers and sisters which has been so wonderfully demonstrated in the AIDS crisis.

Finally, to those twisted few who cannot abide our love, we hope this picture will at least help you to get used to it, because our love will not go away, and we will not go away. Our love will prevail over your bigotry, and our love will conquer AIDS. Love must prevail. It is our last hope as a species, but it is also our best hope.

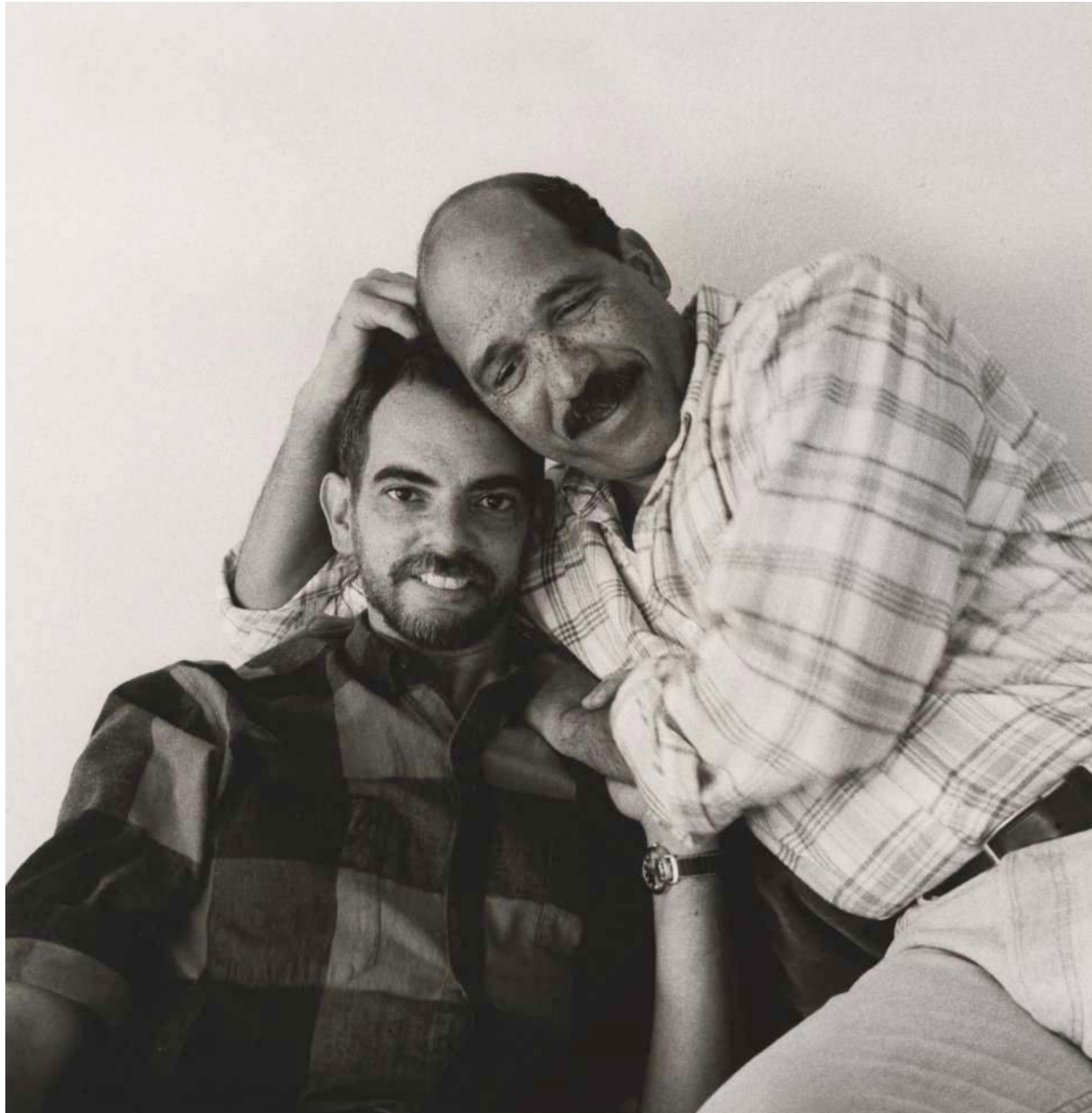
-Dick (Obenchain)



Gryphon Blackswan

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Gypsy Ray (1949 - 2020), Gryphon Blackswan, 1986



**Gypsy Ray** (1949 - 2020), Gerald & Wesley, 1986

### Gerald and Wesley

(Wesley HIV Positive)

Unsuspectingly, AIDS crept into our lives and very quickly we were engaged in a battle of survival. It is painful to think we may never win; it hurts to watch those who have already lost; and it's touching to know so many who love and care. What's to happen to us all?

- Gerald.



### Judi and Ralph Stone

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Our only child, Michael, was diagnosed with AIDS the last day of September 1984. He died two months later on November 25 1984. He was 19. Losing Michael was the hardest thing that we have had to face. But his death was also an incredibly beautiful experience which we will treasure for the rest of our lives. Along with the pain, our lives have changed in positive ways. We have grown. We have come to terms with our mortality. We have grown closer to each other. During the two months before his death we were privileged to see Michael mature, to see his courage, and to see how brave he was and how he never complained. We feel good that we were there for him. We were able to talk about things that might not have been talked about had Michael had a normal life span.



**BUTLER GALLERY**

The photographs in this exhibition were taken at a time when medical responses to HIV/AIDS was in its infancy. A diagnosis in the 1980s and 1990s was devastating news to those who received it. The situation is vastly different today with new antiretroviral drugs and therapies allowing people to live long and healthy lives. Gypsy Ray's photos are therefore not only a record of the humanity of her sitters at a given period of time but also a testament to how the world of science continually strives to make our world and lives better.