

Joseph Lovett, TV Producer Who Shed an Early Light on AIDS, Dies at 80

At CBS and ABC, he pursued news segments aimed at destigmatizing gay life and drawing attention to an epidemic that at the time was largely overlooked.



By Miguel Salazar

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Joseph Lovett, a broadcast news producer and documentarian who made one of the first long-form network television segments on the AIDS crisis and who plumbed his own personal tragedies in works that blended reporting and public health advocacy, died on July 14 at his home in Manhattan. He was 80.

The cause was cardiopulmonary arrest, his grandnephew Sayer Pease said.

As an openly gay producer, Mr. Lovett was a rarity in the broadcast news world of the 1970s and '80s. Working at CBS and ABC, he pursued news segments aimed at destigmatizing gay life in the United States and drawing attention to the AIDS crisis at a time when that subject was largely overlooked by mainstream news organizations.

In May 1983, when Mr. Lovett produced the first long-form news segment on AIDS for the ABC News program “20/20,” the disease had received slim coverage since being identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1981. Only a handful of mainstream outlets, including “PBS NewsHour,” The New York Times Magazine and Newsweek, had spotlighted it. After witnessing friends dying of the disease, he resolved to cover it.

In the resulting segment, a young Geraldo Rivera sounded the alarm about the crisis in interviews with public officials, patients, researchers and activists, including Dr. Edward N. Brandt Jr., assistant secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services; Dr. Anthony Fauci, who at the time was an immunology researcher at the National Institutes of Health; and the playwright and AIDS activist Larry Kramer.



Mr. Lovett at a gala for A.L.S. research in Burbank, Calif., in 2004. J. Merritt/FilmMagic, via Getty Images

The segment criticized the Reagan administration’s slow response to the crisis and singled out The Times for an absence of AIDS-related articles on its front page. After it aired, letters of support poured in from AIDS patients, health officials and fellow journalists across the country.

“He dragged television audiences kicking and screaming into understanding the epidemic,” Mr. Rivera said in an interview. “He was nonstop. Once he got wound up, he was determined.”

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As the epidemic became national news — The Times ran its first front-page article about it within a week of the “20/20” investigation — Mr. Lovett remained a steadfast chronicler in follow-up segments, including one about Rock Hudson’s death from the disease in 1985 and another in which Barbara Walters held a toddler diagnosed with AIDS, to dispel public fears about skin contact.

Mr. Lovett’s reports were often crowdsourced from a vibrant network of activists and journalists he had cultivated in Lower Manhattan, where he lived. With his partner, Jim Cottrell, an anesthesiologist at SUNY Downstate Medical Center, he would host activists, journalists and intellectuals at their home, on Fifth Avenue in Greenwich Village. (Mr. Kramer, who lived down the street from Mr. Lovett, would bang on his door to ask whether he was working on AIDS-related coverage.)



Mr. Lovett on the set of the 1993 installation of "In a New Light," a yearly series of specials he created that was aimed at demystifying AIDS and raising awareness of prevention. via Lovett-Cottrell family

After 10 years at the network, Mr. Lovett left ABC in 1989 and started his own independent production company. In the early 1990s, he created "In a New Light," a yearly series of star-studded specials aimed at demystifying the disease and raising prevention awareness. Airing from 1992 to 1996, it was hosted by celebrities like Elizabeth Taylor, Arsenio Hall, Paula Abdul and Ms. Walters.

Mr. Lovett drew heavily on personal tragedies in later films and documentaries. He staged a re-enactment of his mother being crushed by a runaway car, an incident he witnessed as a 13-year-old, in the film "The Accident" (1999). The death of his father and three siblings to cancer prompted him to produce and direct "Cancer: Evolution to Revolution" (2000), a film about coping, treating and learning to live with the disease; in one scene, he had a colonoscopy on camera. The documentary won a 2001 Peabody Award and was nominated for a Primetime Emmy in 2000.



Mr. Lovett's documentary "Cancer: Evolution to Revolution" won a 2001 Peabody Award and was nominated for a Primetime Emmy in 2000. HBO

Throughout his career, Mr. Lovett developed a frank approach to his productions. "We don't talk about bodily fluids, we talk about sexual fluids," he told Etcetera magazine, an L.G.B.T. digest based in Atlanta, ahead of a new installment of "In a New Light" in 1993. "We don't deal in euphemisms."

"Television is a fantastic opportunity for education," he added. "And education doesn't have to be dull."

Joseph Fromm Lovett was born in Providence, R.I., on March 29, 1945. The youngest of five siblings, he moved in with his older sister, Tricia, after the death of his mother, Jeanne (Millman) Lovett, in 1958. His father, Samuel Lovett, a builder who worked on Cape Cod, died of colon cancer in 1954, when Joseph was a child.

He attended the Moses Brown School in Providence and earned a bachelor's degree in English at Columbia University in 1967. That year, he enrolled in the film M.F.A. program at the university, but, swept up by student protests, he dropped out in 1968.

His first job after film school was casting actors for Amram Nowak Associates, a production company. He was hired as an editor for CBS in 1975 and later promoted to producer. His first long-form segment, "Parents of Gays," was aired in 1977 on "Magazine," a daytime program.



Mr. Lovett, right, with Jim Cottrell on Fire Island in 1995. The two men began dating shortly after meeting in 1976 and married in Massachusetts in 2004, on the first day same-sex marriage was legal there. via Lovett-Cottrell family

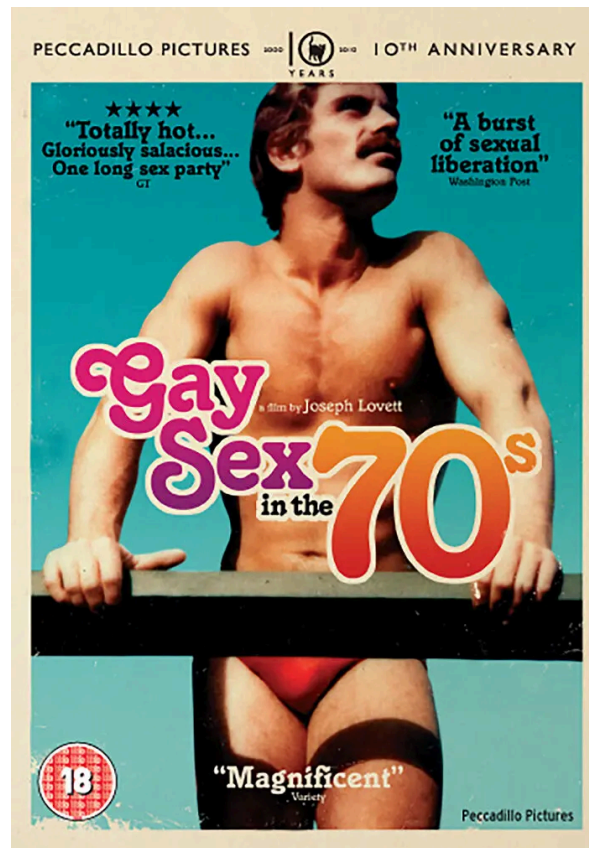
Mr. Lovett met Dr. Cottrell in 1976 over the watercress stand at the Jefferson Market in Greenwich Village. “Joe came up to me and tapped me on the shoulder,” Dr. Cottrell recalled. When Dr. Cottrell turned, Mr. Lovett asked, “Would you be offended if I propositioned you?” They began dating shortly after and married in Barnstable, Mass., in 2004, on the first day that same-sex marriage was legal in the state.

Mr. Lovett joined ABC as a producer in 1979. As the only out gay producer at the network, he fought to bring visibility to gay issues. (A profile of James Baldwin he produced that same year never aired; in 2021, he recalled the reaction at ABC as “Who wants to listen to a Black gay has-been?”) His “20/20” segments covering the AIDS crisis earned him a reputation as a crusading journalist, and he also became known as a gregarious mentor to young reporters.



The segments Mr. Lovett produced for “20/20” covering the AIDS crisis earned him a reputation as a crusading journalist. He also became known as a gregarious mentor to young reporters. The New York University Archives

He started his own production company, Lovett Stories & Strategies, in 1989. Among the projects he worked on was a one-hour ABC special on adoption, “Born in My Heart” (2001), which he produced with Ms. Walters. He also produced and directed the documentaries “Gay Sex in the 70s” (2005); “Going Blind” (2010), which was prompted by his own glaucoma diagnosis; and “Children of the Inquisition” (2019), which followed descendants of families who had fled the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions as they traced their roots.



Among the many documentaries Mr. Lovett produced and directed was “Gay Sex in the 70s” (2005). Peccadillo Pictures

Dr. Cottrell is Mr. Lovett’s only immediate survivor.

One of his final projects, “Something Terrible Happened to Joey” (2022), a short animated film about confronting childhood trauma narrated by Rosie Perez, follows a boy who experiences an unspecified “terrible” thing and, as a result, has to navigate the world carrying a giant sack of coal.



One of Mr. Lovett's final projects was "Something Terrible Happened to Joey" (2022), a short animated film about confronting childhood trauma. A Closer Look

The boy lugs the coal around for years, but it begins to shrink only when he opens up to his friends about the terrible thing. When the sack finally disappears, he searches for it but instead finds a balloon. It lifts him above magnolia trees, above blossoming flower beds, above his waving friends and into a white sky.

Kitty Bennett contributed research.