35 years ago a loosely organized coalition of arts professionals, in collaboration with artists, banded together to respond to the devastating effect AIDS was having on our community, to organize the art world towards direct action and, as artist Derek Jackson stated, “to turn a devastating situation into one of hope, connectedness, and creativity.” Born out of tragedy in 1988, at the height of the AIDS crisis, and nurtured by anger, loss and unbearable pain, Visual AIDS was one of the first initiatives to record the impact of AIDS on the artistic community *by* members of the arts community.

Early Visual AIDS projects such as the Red Ribbon, Day Without Art, and Night Without Light, brought together the arts and AIDS communities, and increased public awareness about AIDS at the time. Today, the Red Ribbon is an internationally recognized symbol of compassion for people living with AIDS and their caregivers. And Day Without Art is a continuing reminder that AIDS is still among us, that it has not been eradicated.

The Visual AIDS Archive, co-founded by Frank Moore and David Hirsh in 1994 to counter the loss and destruction of works by artists who died of AIDS, aimed to document artists’ works thus ensuring their legacy. Today, our growing Archive houses over 25,600 slides and more than 18,000 digital images from 945 living artists and estates. Our holdings constitute the only extant historical materials for many of these artists. This unique collection, unlike any in the world, honors the legacy of artists lost to AIDS and supports artists living with HIV today. Ann Northrop, journalist and activist speaking of the archives value said: “In the work of artists living and archived by Visual AIDS we can trace the beauty and the Angel, the promise fulfilled and only hinted at.”

In the spirit of our founders, Art critic and writer Robert Atkins, curators Gary Garrels, Thomas Sokolowski and William Olander, we are fully committed to assisting artists living with HIV, preserving and honoring the work of artists lost to AIDS, and raising AIDS awareness at a time when, sadly, many have forgotten that AIDS is not over, that many of us are still living with HIV, and many continue to get infected worldwide.

40 years into the AIDS epidemic the sense of urgency and action has waned for many, but not for Visual AIDS. Drawing from a deep sense of community and responsibility we remain firmly rooted in our mission. We continue to provoke dialog around HIV issues today by: producing, commissioning, and presenting exhibitions that address the relationship between HIV and contemporary culture; issuing publications (over 30 since the year 2000) that give voice to artists; recording oral histories that capture the stories of long term survivors;, and presenting public programs. We’ve also commissioned 57 short films, given out $670,000 in direct grants to artists, and provided curatorial residences and archival research fellowships to bolster our archival holdings.

Above all, Visual AIDS is an organization with heart. I was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in 1989 and have been kept alive by the new medications since. But surviving is not living. By the year 2000 I had no energy or motivation, I lacked interest in everything, I felt I was slowly disappearing. Seeking connection and hoping to stop surviving and start living, I reached out to Visual AIDS. The community, commitment and love I found there brought me back from the edge. I no longer feel I am disappearing.

Carlos Gutierrez-Solana