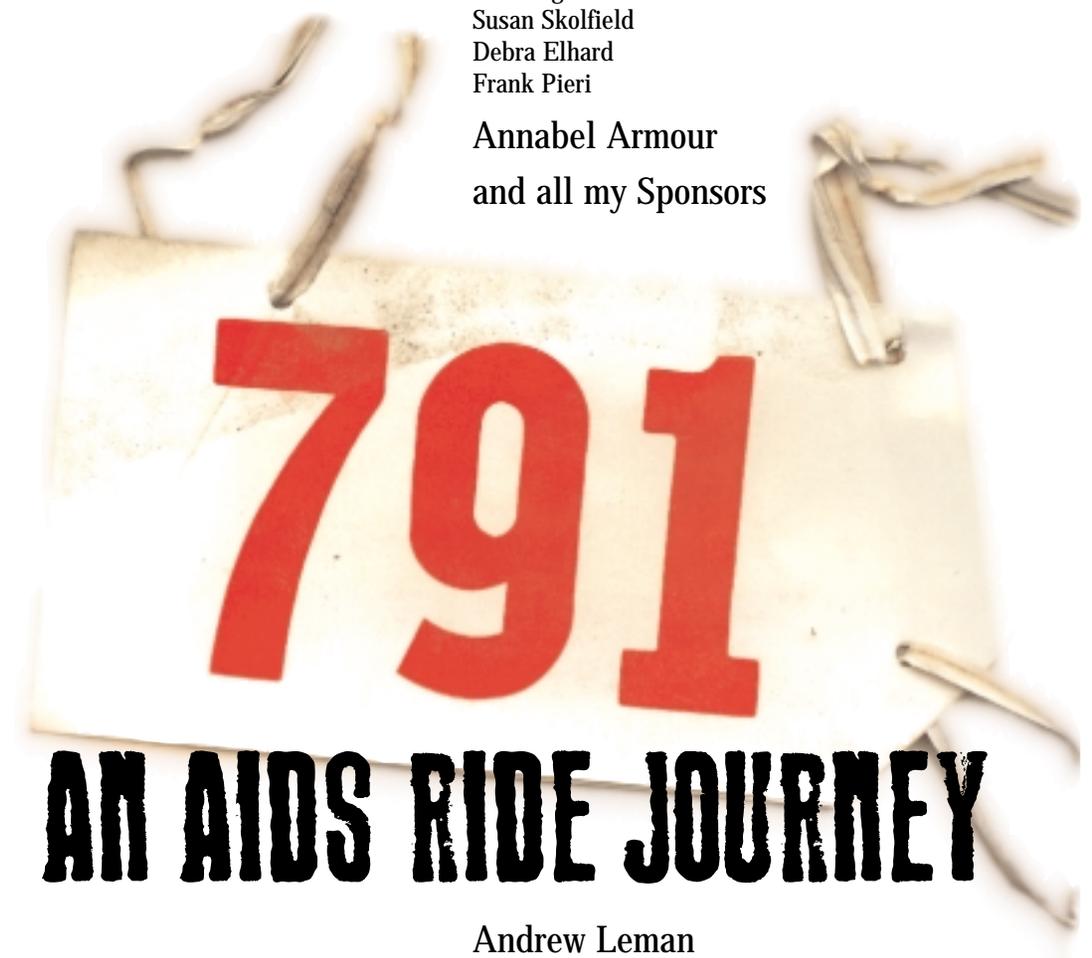


Dedicated to

Dan Pallotta
Kevin Honeycutt & the Chicago staff
Mr. Jenkins and all the folks at Tanqueray
Susan Silberman
Matt Matcuk
Wellesley Chapman
Paul Brinkman
Jamie Anderson
Judith Kitzes
Kim Osgood & Pat Kane-Gaule
Susan Skolfield
Debra Elhard
Frank Pieri

Annabel Armour
and all my Sponsors



AN AIDS RIDE JOURNEY

Andrew Leman

Chicago
17 August 1996

I walked around the apartment. It was strange being home. Everything seemed different somehow. Space itself looked altered to me. Everything seemed smaller. Things seemed oddly quiet.

But, at the same time, good. Very very good. Surrounded once again by the familiar objects of my life, my books and pictures and the relics of time spent with friends, I fell at last into my own bed, and went happily to dreamy sleep.

DAY 1 OF THE REST OF MY LIFE:

CHICAGO TO THE MOON

The AIDS Ride changed my life.

Just yesterday I ran into Stephen Spencer, a friend and fellow actor in town whom I haven't seen in months. He said he didn't recognize me, that I looked like a different person. I replied: "I am a different person."

For one thing, I've lost about sixty pounds. Some of that weight went prior to beginning training, but at least forty or fifty pounds of that weight loss is directly due to the Ride. None of my pants fit anymore, and even the new shorts that I bought just a couple of months ago are now too big.

I'm stronger, more flexible, and have more endurance. My knees feel better and more reliable than they have in years. My skin is clearer. My posture is improved. I have as much of a tan as my freckling Irish skin is capable of getting.

I still don't look exactly like I want to look. I won't be starting that new career as a model for Calvin Klein underwear anytime soon. But I'm more comfortable with my own body now than I've been in twenty years.

And that newfound comfort goes far far beyond mere vanity. In years past, as my anti-athletic personality solidified and I grew more spiritual-

Partner Portrait

Anabel and me at the Victory Celebration.

Photo by Matt Mateuk.



ly square, I became more physically round. Now the reverse is in progress: as I become more physically square and lean and flexible, I become more spiritually well-rounded. I've always been primarily a creature of mental and (forgive me but I can't think of a better word) spiritual effort. As an actor this has sometimes been a great advantage, but occasionally something of a handicap; my work on stage has never been very physically oriented or grounded. For most of my life, certainly all of my adult life, my body has been nothing more than a great big blob: an impediment weighting down a soul that was eager to move and explore and accomplish; an inconvenience that required sleep and medicine and other attention; a barely functioning appendage of an incorporeal will, that mostly just got in my way. I gave it only the barest minimum of maintenance, abused it with too much food and not enough of anything else, and attempted to hide it with capacious clothing. It harbors some needs with which society in general is rather uncomfortable, while at the same time failing to excite much interest among those who might sympathize. It has consistently been a source of deep shame and self-reproach. My hands comprise an exception. They can sculpt and sew and type pretty quickly, and handle delicate fossils without causing too much damage: their agility has always served me well. But I have never strongly identified with the rest of my body. It's never really been much a part of my sense of self. It's always seemed foreign and intrusive and inept and beside the point. In many of my darker hours I've even contemplated getting rid of it and being done with it; unfettering my spirit once and for all, and moving on to a place where it wouldn't matter. Even took out the razor blades once or twice.

Because of the Ride, all that is now changing. I have been reunited with myself and made more whole. My physical nature is at last communicating with my mental and emotional self, and beginning to claim a fairer share of my time and attention. My whole self is benefitting as a result.

The Ride has left me with the feeling that there's pretty much nothing I can't do. Certainly nothing I don't know I can't do until I try. I've always been pretty willing to take artistic risks. Once in a while I've taken some physical risks as well. Now I feel able to take on many more of those, and I feel I can begin to take some social risks I have never been willing to take. I've never been able to put my whole self on the line, because I've never really had my whole self at my own disposal. That is changing.

Years ago, in college, Gary Leatherman and I were having breakfast one morning with a friend from the same dorm, Mike Salamon. Mike started a conversation by asking, "If you could bring back one person from the dead, who would you pick?" He asked the question because he wanted to talk about the various merits of his own candidates, and he mentioned the kinds of names you might expect. I can't now remember who specifically,

but all were major historical figures: Einstein, Jesus, Newton, Napoleon, people like that. After holding forth for a while, he turned to me and asked who I would choose. I didn't want to play the game, and tried to deflect the question. Mike has remained one of my very dearest friends, and has proven himself to be among the most sensitive and considerate people I know. But on this particular morning he wouldn't let me off the hook. So I looked him in the eye and told him the truth.

"My father," I said.

There was of course an awkward silence, and the game quickly ended. I didn't need to say anything else to make my point: a man's death is no less sad because he wasn't famous. I feel the loss of my father no less keenly because his funeral wasn't covered on CNN.

By the same token, those who die of AIDS are not somehow more nobly dead than those who die by any other cause. There are a million ways to die, and AIDS is only one of them. But AIDS outrages me because it didn't have to be this way. It's only thanks to hatred, fear and prejudice the epidemic ever got so out of hand, and mostly hatred, fear and prejudice stand between us and a cure. It also terrifies me because it has come closer to me than most other forms of mortality—I notice it every day, in fact—and because it is sheer luck that I myself am not infected with HIV.

Because of the Ride, I think I appreciate that more now than ever. I think I have always taken life for granted. My survival instincts have never really been tested. I've always pretty much had my health, plenty to eat, abundantly adequate shelter and clothing, and I seldom stopped really to consider how incredibly lucky that made me. But to know that some of my fellow riders were getting up each morning and climbing those hills despite being afflicted with a terminal disease, to know that from the pain of her hospital bed Susan Silberman was making plans for training for next year on her new artificial leg, and to have ridden the miles from Minneapolis to Chicago has brought new vibrance to me to the feeling of being alive. I know that other riders felt this way when it was over: a profound sense of being really truly alive. It is deeply and abidingly good. Because of the Ride I can now say something that has not always been true: I want to live. It's not that I've ever really wanted to die. Well, maybe once or twice. But I didn't really "want" to live, either. Being alive was the baseline condition, and I never really thought about it. It was a given. But it's not a given. It's a taken. I see now more clearly that it's a choice, an option that some people don't have, and it's wonderful. I feel my life in a new way, a tinglingly physical and emotional and intellectual and willful way.

I want to live.

It's five weeks now after the Ride. I'm still wearing my wristbands. Annabel had to cut hers off about three weeks ago. We got together with Debra and Judith at a dinner we had over at Pat and Kim's, and in a ceremonial moment we all helped Annabel remove them. Kim finally cut hers off just last week in a similar ceremony here at my house. I realized while writing this account that when I am done, in just another page or two, it will be time for me to cut off mine and move on to the next thing. In a sense the Ride is ending again for me, which I'll tell you is sad.

In a way it's crazy, because I don't even know his full name, but I will miss the Chicken Lady. Terribly. Luckily I will still get to see Pat and Kim, and Susan and Debra and Judith, because I feel so close now to all of them. At dinner at Pat & Kim's, Debra commented that, as a highly independent single woman, her hardest lesson to learn was the value of interdependence. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I reflected that on the Ride we also learned that each part is also itself greater by virtue of being part of the whole. Each individual pushed past what he or she thought were limits on this Ride, but doing so was only made possible by the supportive and caring environment that we made for each other. By working together, we not only achieved a remarkable group feat, five million bucks, but each of us individually achieved at a level higher than we would otherwise be capable of. Oliver Wendell Holmes said: "We have shared the incommunicable experience of war. We have felt—we still feel—the passion of life to its top." He was referring to the Civil War, but he would have felt right at home on the AIDS Ride.

I love riding my bicycle. There's an old Warner Brothers Road Runner cartoon in which Wile E. Coyote builds himself a vehicle out of an Acme™ jet engine and a pair of bicycle handlebars. When I get on Callipygius and put my feet in the clips, I feel just like that coyote zooming across the desert. Except without the part about plummeting off a cliff. So far, I will continue to ride. I still ride to work almost every day. Annabel and Matt Matcuk and I are returning to Michigan on Sunday for a nice 60 or 70 miles. I'll ride with Wellesley whenever I can. And Annabel still

meets me at the museum after work and we ride together, singing our duets and talking about everything there is. I've bought myself a BowFlex weight training machine and have begun working out on it. Next year I plan to ride in the California AIDS Ride, and work crew for Twin Cities-Chicago. Annabel currently plans to ride in both. Judith is going to ride Twin Cities-Chicago next year, and has already begun training. Beth McGeehan is thinking of riding too.

The sixty-year old dad of the young man at the edge of the crowd on the Ride Out of Minneapolis made it through with flying colors. We saw him several times in the evenings, enjoying dinner and a nice sit-down under the big top.

I took the bug that attacked our tent neighbor, Kevin, to the museum, and showed it to entomologist Phil Parrillo, a man whose sangfroid is unshaken by even the most repellent insects. Barely batting an eye, he said "Oh yes, it's a stag beetle. A male. *Pseudolucanus capreolus*. They're quite common." Apparently they nest in rotting wood and come out at this time of year. They're not normally aggressive: Kevin must have irritated this one. The bug is now in a giant gelatin capsule in a vial on my desk.

I returned to Minneapolis two weeks after the Ride to attend Gary & Mary Lou's wedding. It was one of the coolest, most fun, and best catered weddings I've ever enjoyed. And the big surprise was, turns out they had already been married in secret for three years, and the event we witnessed was a renewal of vows, but this time with backup singers. I'm sure they will be as happy together for the rest of their lives as they've been so far.

I own a beautiful 1930s vintage tuxedo, but I have not been able to wear it for years because I've been too fat. My deal with Annabel was that, when we got back from the Ride, I would put on my tux and she would put on her fanciest duds, and I would take her out for a ridiculously expensive dinner. The night after we got back, we consummated the deal. Annabel and I, and Kim and Pat, put on our glad rags and went out to one of our favorite (thought not actually all that expensive) restaurants, Trattoria Gianni, and shared a victory meal. The tux fits me now. Perfectly.

I don't know how to say thank you to all of you for being part of my experience. In a sense I think this whole absurdly long opus is an attempt to do that. I hope you can feel as proud of yourselves for your contribution as I feel of you.

Writing compels us to brevity, and invites thoroughness and coherence. Although you may find it hard to believe that this is the short version of my story (and it is), please know that it is as thorough and as deeply thought through as it is heartfelt. It was an intense experience, and I could not write about it except intensely. It was also an overwhelming experience, and in case you're thinking that I've told you everything, trust me, I haven't. I have a few secrets left.

The Ride isn't over. It's a journey that is just beginning.

I was Chicago rider number seven hundred ninety-one.



Debra's bike, with the picture of Larry Gray on the back, as it was during the Ride.

Photo by Debra.