In the ’80s, He Was an AIDS Activist, Today He’s a MacArthur “Genius”

Watch Gregg Gonsalves explain how his work affects public health, human rights and health inequities. [VIDEO]

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AIDS activist Gregg Gonsalves was awarded one of this year’s esteemed MacArthur Fellowships. Dubbed the MacArthur “Genius” Grants, each year, the awards go to 25 people who are exceptionally creative and whose work shows important promise. Each recipient receives a $625,000 no-strings-attached stipend.

For Gonsalves, the fight against AIDS is personal. In the mid-1990s, he tested positive for HIV. But before that, in the 1980s, he was involved in the activist group ACT UP Boston and then ACT UP New York, where he cofounded Treatment Action Group (TAG) in the early 1990s, which focused on the research and science related to the virus.

He worked at AIDS service organization Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) and became involved in global advocacy when he moved to South Africa.

Then he returned to the states to get his doctorate at Yale, graduating in 2011. Today, he is an epidemiologist and global health advocate at Yale University’s Department of Epidemiology of Microbial Diseases.

“My work is designed to give politicians and policymakers the information they need to make better decisions for better public health,” Gonsalves says in a video filmed for the 2018 MacArthur Fellows. (You can watch it above and then read more of his bio on MacFound.org; in addition, you can learn more about this year’s fellows here.)

More specifically, he uses “quantitative techniques to address deficiencies in the provision of care, largely for HIV.” In the video, Gonsalves gives an example: “One of the projects I’m working on now is using a set of algorithms or mathematical tools that were originally designed to figure out how to go to the hottest slot machine in a casino. But we’re using that same kind of thinking and decision-making algorithms to figure out where to test for HIV infection, to find the greatest number of HIV-positive people who are still undiagnosed.”

In 2012, Gonsalves also helped create the Global Health Justice Partnership. GHJP helps address global health inequities by using three tools: legal reform, social mobilization and advocacy.

Gonsalves continues to fight HIV, but his skills and work also tackle tuberculosis, cholera, the high cost of hepatitis C drugs and even the outbreak of HIV related to opioid drug use.

In July 2016, Gonsalves was profiled as a POZ Hero. You can read that article here.

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