A Positive Campaign

Inside a Mayor's West (Hollywood) Wing

June 1, 2005 By Lucile Scott

WHO: John Duran

AGE: 45

HOME: West Hollywood, California

DIAGNOSED: 1994

People knew I was HIV positive from the day I got elected to West Hollywood's City Council in 2001. Then, in 2004, I became mayor, since council members rotate annually into that position. I was reelected to the council in March and was very relieved that I won. During the campaign, another candidate e-mailed an organization that had endorsed me, saying I might miss council meetings because I had AIDS. Even when I got sick in 2002 and was on short-term disability, I showed up to every meeting. Having HIV can even help—I'm used to being in hot spots.

I first decided to run for city council because I'd been politically active for 20 years and thought, "I can do this job as well as anybody else." I was a lawyer for ACT UP in the '80s. I also represented needle exchanges and medical-marijuana lobbies. I never thought I'd be the Establishment. But having been the guy holding the big banner and getting hauled off to jail gives me a different perspective. I'm more open to criticism from activists. And now, when I call the sheriff or aboard, they answer.

West Hollywood has a high percentage of HIVers and a really nasty crystal epidemic that's leading to a lot of new infections—so I made that my mayorial priority. I started community crystal forums. Over 200 people came to the most recent one, about crystal and the sex industry. I also opened a drug and alcohol recovery center. I've been in meth recovery myself for eight years and know what it's like. It's so frustrating to see these successful, bright gay men in relationships with great paying jobs reduced to homeless people.

Not being mayor this year will actually allow more time for my crystal projects and others—including animal cruelty and affordable housing. As for higher office, if the opportunity arises and I'm feeling healthy, I'll run. People sometimes view health issues as a weakness preventing you from optimal public service. But if a larger electorate is less liberal, that just means more people to educate about HIV.

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