Bear With Him

January 1, 2009 By James Wortman

Dab Garner's relationship with AIDS began in 1981 when the disease was still known as GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) and few knew what the mysterious virus was and why it was spreading.

In the early days, hospitals hesitated to allow visitors into GRID patients' rooms. Unable to personally console his friends hospitalized with the disease, Garner found another way to comfort them: He sent each and every one a stuffed teddy bear—an appropriate gesture because he identifies as a "bear." In the LGBT community, bears typically share the physical characteristics of their animal namesake, including hairiness and visible masculinity.

"It was natural to give bears to my friends in the hospital, to give them some sort of comfort or joy by at least having something next to them that they could hug," says Garner, now 46, who was himself diagnosed with HIV in 1982.

Garner continued to comfort his HIV-positive loved ones with teddy bears through the years as his AIDS activism took him from California, where he first volunteered at AIDS Project Los Angeles in the 1990s; to Washington, DC, where he participated in crucial clinical trials at the National Institutes of Health (NIH); and to Jacksonville, Florida, where he helms the Dab the AIDS Bear Project as its founder and CEO. Since 2004, the grassroots organization has worked to correct disparities in the Ryan White CARE Act and eliminate the unnecessarily long—and sometimes deadly—waits for medication under the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP).

"In this day and age where we send billions [of dollars] to other countries, we need to be taking care of our own first," says Garner, who was recently voted Trailblazer of the Year by Jacksonville ASOs. "I'm not saying that we shouldn't be helping other countries, but when we have an American citizen dying from AIDS without access to medications, that's just wrong." Garner feels it is his responsibility to help right those wrongs.

A testament to this new era of cooperative AIDS activism, Garner has teamed up with the Association for the Advancement of Retired Persons (AARP) for their Divided We Fail campaign, which aims to ensure affordable, quality health care and financial security for all Americans.

Throughout the 2008 presidential campaign season, Divided We Fail pushed both national and local candidates to pledge that they would address the issues of health care and financial security, both of which are essential to those battling chronic illnesses such as HIV.

With Barack Obama headed to the White House, Garner is confident that many of those promises will be honored. He looks forward to working with our new commander in chief to keep AIDS on the agenda.

“[I was] so fortunate to meet our president-elect during the campaign. I heard his words and his passion,” Garner says, “I do believe he will work to ensure a better America for all of us. It is going to take time and a lot of hard work to get our great country back on solid ground, but I feel Americans made the right decision.”

For more information on the Dab the AIDS Bear Project, visit dabtheaidsbearproject.com.

Editor’s Note: The web address above has been corrected.

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