Bobbing with Bill

A one-act power play

February 1, 1996 By Bob Lederer

“I don’t want you to disrupt the Conference.”

That’s what *POZ* Publisher Sean Strub told me the day the White House issued my press credential for the President’s December 6 AIDS extravaganza. I told him -- sincerely -- that I’d respect his wishes. I honestly thought I’d play out my shrill-voice role at the outdoor community demo.

But when I got into the warm, ornate Cash Room at the Treasury Department -- along with 250 well-paid bureaucrats, scientists and AIDS professionals -- my resolve was sorely tested. Clinton announced meaningless “bold initiatives” (new study panels) and nine “community leaders” dialogued with him oh-so-politely. I waited in vain for someone to say the Emperor had no clothes.

Meanwhile, out in the cold -- literally and figuratively -- a ragtag army of 200 activists (the majority PWAs of color on Medicaid) marched for hours demanding life-saving actions. Inspired by their strength and courage, I decided I had to act.

As Clinton closed the event promising “systematic follow-up,” I called out, adrenalin pumping, “Why haven’t you done systematic follow-up on the recommendations of two Presidential AIDS commissions? Why has it taken you three years to hold a conference and call for more recommendations?”

Clinton declared my questions “unseemly” because he had adopted “most” of the commissions’ proposals (actually, just a handful). I cited needle exchange as the most urgent of the actions he could take, and demanded answers. But Clinton skillfully pulled the sympathy ploy. “I am very sorry there’s not a cure...I will never be satisfied, and you won’t and you shouldn’t be, until we have solved the problem...But I think this has been a good meeting.”

Good for what? I wondered, amid a sudden standing ovation. Re-election?

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