Boiling Point

Scores of activists stage the biggest AIDS demo in a decade-but big-time ASOs are missing in action

August 1, 2004 By Tim Murphy

On May 20, an alliance of national and local activists pulled off a massive, hollering-and-handcuffs AIDS protest. Nearly a thousand people from across the country gathered in the capital's Folger Park to launch a raucous march against the Bush administration's flat funding of AIDS programs, abstinence-only prevention and slippery global promises—and to demand that the disease become a priority in the 2004 campaign. The demo, which prompted 100 arrests, revived the seemingly lost art of civil disobedience that forced AIDS onto the national scene in the '80s and early '90s. But it also tapped into newfound rage. Said organizer Paul Feldman of the National Association of People With AIDS (NAPWA), "People are fed up."

And boy, did they show it. Waving signs screaming fully fund adap now, combata sida and abstinence-only sucks, the throng headed first for Republican National Committee (RNC) headquarters. Marchers ranged from ACT UP veterans to relative newcomers, such as Philadelphia's Mildred Grant, an African American diagnosed with HIV in 2000. Grant brought her 3-year-old grandson, Ijear, because "I want him to know what it's all about." Some demonstrators were already in town for NAPWA's annual AIDSWatch week, during which people with HIV and their advocates lobby congressional reps.

Flooding the street in front of the RNC, protesters hoisted a sea of black alarm clocks, insisting the world "Wake up!" RNC staffers glowered, tittered and smirked from behind well-guarded doors. The reaction differed, however, when the marchers reached Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters, chanting "John Kerry, end AIDS!" DNC employees circulated fliers touting Kerry's strong AIDS record as DNC head Terry McAuliffe and others observed from balconies.

"Let 'em know we're coming!" the mob shouted as it neared the U.S. Capitol, where scores of police officers loomed. The chanting intensified: "Wake up! Time's up! Fight AIDS!" Suddenly, 100 of the protesters (including *POZ* founder Sean Strub; see Founder's Letter) sat or lay down in the street.

The crowd cried "Shame!" as cops—some wearing rubber gloves—closed in, cuffing the civil disobedients in plastic "zip strips" and carrying off those who wouldn't move. The arrest roll included Feldman and NAPWA leaders Terje Anderson and Vanessa Johnson; ACT UP/Philadelphia's robust, multiracial ranks; and Housing Works top dog Charles King, plus dozens of his agency's

staffers and clients.

Indeed, for Housing Works, which brought eight busloads of protesters from New York City, the day was also, as one staffer said, the "second half of Keith's funeral." He meant the April death of the group's beloved cofounder (and King's lover) Keith Cylar, whose image graced posters and T-shirts. "[Keith and I] were planning on getting arrested together today," King said. "But he would be thrilled to see this."

GIVE IT ARREST!

Just a few of the 100 whom cops cuffed and held…

Health GAP's **Asia Russell**
New York City AIDS Housing Network's **Jennifer Flynn**
NAPWA's **Paul Feldman**
Housing Works' **Maria Sinkler**
POZ founder **Sean Strub**
Housing Works' **Barbara Cassis**
NAPWA's **Terje Anderson**
New York City activist **Louie Jones**

The fiery Cylar might not have been entirely satisfied. Although organizers originally believed that leaders from major AIDS service organizations would be on hand to get arrested, many top ASOs chose not to visibly attend or endorse the event. For Ernest Hopkins of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, "there was too much on the [protest's] table for us to…feel like it was focused." Cornelius Baker, head of DC's Whitman-Walker Clinic, agreed and worried that the protest implied that "Republicans and Democrats were equally bad" on AIDS. At the last minute, endorser Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) of New York City barred staffer Mark McLaurin, a major planner of the event, from emceeing it.

Were ASOs afraid that the demo would come across as an anti-Bush rally and therefore imperil their federal funding? (Organizers had pointedly kept the event nonpartisan to allay that fear.) GMHC was waiting to hear about a federal prevention grant—which it was awarded the day after the protest—but second-in-command Ronald Johnson says, "We determined that [our] resources would be used most effectively in providing strategic guidance to the organizers."

Non-endorsers included AIDS Action, Florida's AIDS Institute, AIDS Project Los Angeles and the National Minority AIDS Council. Organizer Michael Kink of Housing Works can't forgive the no-shows: "The entire public and private response to AIDS was created through activism. There wouldn't be multimillion-dollar agencies and huge federal contracts to worry about if folks hadn't been in the streets."

The Iraqi-prisoner-obsessed media largely overlooked the demo. But the Kerry campaign, clearly aware of the importance of the event, released a strong statement on global AIDS two days before. Bush's camp says it's working on a questionnaire for Aidsvote.org, which holds candidates

to task on AIDS. What's more, Feldman says, the spectacle "pumped up" AIDS activists for an expected march on August's Republican convention. (To stay in the loop, visit www.champnetwork.org.)

The demo also touched hearts. As an African-American cop cuffed Housing Works client Jan Thurman, he had words for the 53-year-old HIVer. "He said he understood why we wanted to make a statement because he had lost his sister to the disease," said Thurman. "After that I felt real good, because I knew what I was doing was right."

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