Charles King Has a Dream

This month, thousands of activists will take part in the ambitious campaign to end aids. Meet the HIver trying to launch a national movement.

September 1, 2005 By David Thorpe

The man who hopes to reinvent American AIDS activism is sitting in his spacious corner office overlooking bustling down- town Brooklyn, restlessly clicking a pen as he speaks about his vision. In a black suit and suspenders, Charles King, 50, looks every bit the CEO: He runs New York City's venerable AIDS service organization Housing Works. He also looks every bit the AIDS revolutionary, with his unruly salt-and-pepper beard and braided ponytail. When Sean Barry, a field organizer for the Campaign to End AIDS, comes in to say good night, King smiles broadly and glances at Barry's worn gray sneakers."Sean, I'm going to have to take you shopping.

You dress like a 23-year-old," he says.

"I am 23," replies Barry.

King expects a lot from people. Terje Anderson, head of the National Association of People With AIDS (NAPWA), says he "pushes people to their limits, and sometimes beyond." This fall, King hopes to push the federal government, the AIDS establishment and especially people with HIV into unprecedented territory. In September and October, Housing Works and every allied organization it can rally will stage the most expensive, longest—and perhaps most radical and ambitious—AIDS demo in history as part of a new activist movement called the Campaign to End AIDS, or C2EA. Nobody knows if it will succeed, but the charismatic King may be its secret weapon. Though this ordained Baptist minister is reluctant to acknowledge it, he has assumed the role of national leader, crisscrossing the country to persuade a new generation of people with HIV to act up. One of the few HIVers to helm a major AIDS service organization (ASO)—with a $41 million budget, Housing Works is the nation's largest housing provider to people with HIV—King is in a unique position to drive the movement. He is also locked in a struggle to get several of the biggest ASOs on board.

2EA officially began last May, with a small but rowdy march to the White House. It truly gets underway in mid-September, when nine activists' caravans starting in Portland, Oregon; Seattle; Oakland, California; Los Angeles; San Diego; Brownsville, Texas; Miami; New York City; and Burlington, Vermont, will spend weeks wending toward Washington, stopping to highlight local and national AIDS issues. On October 8, the caravans, which King hopes will be 1,000 strong, will

converge on the capital for five days of meetings, lawmaker visits, one big march and a day of direct action. King would like to see 10,000 people visit their congressmen on the same day, effectively clogging up the capital. “There’s no law that you have to have an appointment,” he says.

C2EA’s long-term goals are grandiose: global access to “high-quality” treatment and support services for people with HIV, “ramped up” science-based prevention, more cure and treatment research and massive efforts to fight stigma and discrimination. It also has more concrete policy objectives, such as fully funding the Ryan White Care Act and strengthening Medicaid. But C2EA’s immediate goal is forging a nationwide network of grassroots AIDS activists, driven by the “second generation” of PWAs: poor people, young people, women, African Americans, Latinos and Southerners with few connections to the first wave of largely gay-male AIDS activism. “There are people who are the solution to ending AIDS but haven’t been asked,” says Julie Davids, executive director of the Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP), after Housing Works the organization most invested in C2EA. C2EA’s organizers believe that, after experiencing this fall’s unprecedented demo, participants will organize and advocate locally for years to come—and keep the heat on nationally. Housing Works has committed to making C2EA its principal vehicle for national advocacy for at least five years.

While King is no wallflower, he constantly deflects authorship of C2EA. It is true that national organizations such as CHAMP and NAPWA are heavily involved, as are hundreds of independent activists, regular people with HIV and their supporters. Four hundred organizations have endorsed C2EA. Nonetheless, King is its de facto leader. Housing Works has pledged $310,000 to the movement, far more than any other organization. Since January, King has spent “90%” of his time on the road, drumming up support. “I’ve been to 47 cities,” he says ruefully. Finally, it is Housing Works’ ethos, to be sure, that is driving C2EA. Over the years, the organization has created legions of savvy advocates from its clients’ ranks, traditionally the least empowered of all HIVers: people of color, the homeless, IV-drug users.

You couldn’t make up a character like Charles King. He has lived in a guest room at one of Housing Works’ residences since 1997. He—along with 10 siblings—was raised on a cotton farm in Texas; his parents, he says, were “so fundamentalist they thought Southern Baptists were liberals.” He attended Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, where he became a minister at an African-American Baptist church. “The pastor insisted on ordaining me so that I would have ‘black walking papers,’” King says. The conspiracy of silence around AIDS, as parishioners died from the disease, forced a “largely celibate” King to come out as gay.

In 1989, while working on homelessness issues in New York City, King fell in love with fiery ACT UP activist Keith Cylar. The next year, King, Cylar and other ACT UP members founded Housing Works, dedicating themselves to stemming the growing HIVer housing crisis. With HIV positive Cylar leading the charge, Housing Works fought then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s segregationist AIDS policies; it staged sit-ins, disrupted meetings and held vigils. Then, in 1997, the Giuliani administration canceled millions of dollars’ worth of city contracts to Housing Works. Undaunted, Housing Works sued, alleging that Giuliani was retaliating for its activism. The group soldiered on,

thanks in part to entrepreneurial ventures, such as a café/bookstore and upscale thrift stores, which still account for a substantial part of Housing Works' revenue. Just this spring, the city caved and handed Housing Works a nearly $5 million settlement. King says the war with Giuliani "forced us to become self-reliant." That self-reliance allows Housing Works to freely participate in high-profile direct action, such as an anti-Republican demo last fall in Grand Central Station. Nineteen activists were arrested, including King. "The Bush administration has taken the Giuliani approach toward dissent on a national level. People are afraid to speak up," he says.

When Cylar died in 2004 of heart problems, King dutifully became Housing Works' leader. But even before Cylar's death, events were conspiring to prepare King for the new role. In 2002, King seroconverted; he declines to explain how. He says he felt ashamed and embarrassed but Cylar was a "rock" of support. King's seroconversion later gave him the credibility and confidence to lead not just the Housing Works community, but HIVers nationwide. "To be perfectly honest," King says, "I don't think I could keep playing the role I've been playing nationally if I weren't positive. "

Then Bush was re- elected. That sent King back to the final sermon of another Southern preacher, Martin Luther King Jr. "A quote jumped off the page: 'The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land…but when it is dark enough you can see the stars.' I've read that sermon many times, but never focused on that quote—the notion that circumstances would get so bleak that people would become hopeful and moved to action," he says.

King started studying the civil rights movement's parallels to the AIDS movement. Just as many people thought the civil rights battle was won when the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed, King says, AIDS advocates lost a sense of urgency after winning a place at the table in the '90s. The parallels gave him another idea: Before his 1968 assassination, Martin Luther King was planning the Poor People's Campaign, which took place after his death. It began with nine cross-country caravans and aimed to recast civil rights as an issue of social and economic—rather than simply racial—inequality. Similarly, Charles King believes that the AIDS crisis must be seen as "more than a public-health issue. AIDS is a disease of poverty and race as much in the U.S. as it is globally." So King pitched a new version of the Poor People's Campaign to colleagues at other agencies. CHAMP's Davids was flabbergasted that "Charles didn't feel hopeless after the reelection—he was inspired." Scores of AIDS advocates felt the same way; collectively, they created the C2EA movement.

Some AIDS leaders are less in awe of King's dream. While he has energized HIVers in states without a storied history of activism, such as Wyoming, Mississippi and Texas, rallying big ASOs has proved trickier. A few have donated heavily—New York's Harlem United, for example, has given $20,000. The DC lobbying group AIDS Action Council—recently lambasted for cozying up to Bush—has lent planning help. But King is struggling to get the largest ASOs, such as AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA), Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and San Francisco AIDS Foundation (SFAF), to contribute major resources. King had hoped all three would "follow [Housing Works'] example" when it initially gave $100,000 to C2EA; instead, they each gave $10,000.

SFAF head Mark Cloutier says he "shares Charles' commitment" but is fighting a California names-

reporting bill and facing huge Ryan White funding cuts. APLA executive director Craig Thompson—like King, one of the few HIVers to head a major ASO—echoes Cloutier, saying "we must prioritize our resources. Ryan White is at the top of our agenda." GMHC head Ana Oliveira says she "fully supports" C2EA and that $10,000 was the suggested donation. (King says "that may be her interpretation.") King has little patience for such rationales. He says that focusing on federal funding is not enough. "We know minimal increases aren't going to end the epidemic. We need people who are willing to stand up and articulate a vision of a world without AIDS." Nonetheless, King will have to go back and ask for even more money. All told, C2EA's 2005 events will cost $1.35 million.

Despite the roadblocks, King believes C2EA will work. For proof, he says, look no further than Mississippi. Last summer, when the state threatened to cut back HIV meds covered by Medicaid, King encouraged C2EA's Mississippi coordinator, Robin Webb—himself in danger from the cuts—to give an interview to a local paper. Webb feared disclosing his status. "I thought my church wouldn't let me take communion," he says. Instead, Webb's church embraced him, and his subsequent advocacy caught the eye of the *New York Times* and the Associated Press. That led to the governor of Mississippi's reinstatement of the AIDS-meds coverage. Webb recently founded AIDS Action in Mississippi, the state's first statewide AIDS-advocacy group. "I couldn't have done all this without King or Housing Works," he says.

King believes the biggest obstacle to C2EA's effectiveness is simply "people who are living with HIV believing we can make it happen. You can't make time for something unless you really believe in it." Can King make others believe? Soon enough, we'll know the answer.

Itching to jump on the C2EA bandwagon? For more info, visit www.campaigntoendaids.org or call 877-363-2437

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