Down and Out in L.A.

November 1, 2000 By Stacie Stukin

8.14.00 - 8.17.00 Democratic Convention

Neither low-flying helicopters nor high-handed platform committee neglect could quite keep AIDS in the Democratic Party shadows this year, reports Stacie Stukin.

August in Los Angeles is smoggy, dry and intolerably hot. But the scorching sky didn't seem to bother the 35,000 delegates and members of the press at the Democratic convention. They spent their four days in L.A. hermetically sealed inside the city's sparkling new Staples Center, munching on Jody Maroni sausages and McDonald's french fries from fast-food stands conveniently lining the air-conditioned hallways.

Outside on the sweltering streets, the blinding sun was inescapable, reflecting off shiny office buildings, well-waxed cars and the Plexiglas face shields of law-enforcement riot gear. There were cops everywhere. In cars, on motorcycles, on horses. On every corner, holding nightsticks. And standing firmly at attention, sometimes seven deep, as they flanked the routes of protest marches.

The LAPD showed up in vast numbers Tuesday night, August 15, as the Queers and Allies March took off on its merry way from the "designated protest area" at Pershing Square to City Hall to demand passage of the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act, hate-crimes and domestic-partnership legislation, universal health care, an end to immigration restrictions for people with HIV, and increased funding for AIDS research; to kiss-in and, finally, to die-in.

The agenda was grand, but why not? The Democrats were in town, not the Republicans, and these folks knew that the queer vote was critical in electing Clinton/Gore twice and would be in electing Gore/Lieberman, too. "We want to make sure they're talking the talk *and* walking the walk when it comes to our issues," said Sergio Morales, of Queers in L.A., an activist group that helped organize the march. "We don't want to be marginalized."

The power of the queer vote wasn't *completely* lost on Democratic operatives. Earlier that day, First Lady and senate hopeful Hillary Rodham Clinton made a special trip to a gay and lesbian Democratic caucus reception in a hotel near the Staples Center, where, happily, the room's floral carpeting matched her sea-foam green suit and her large Barbara Bush pearls. Her smile glowed as the eyes of Secret Service agents darted around like hungry birds and the whole caucus stood up and cheered long, roaring cheers. "I'm not here to talk about policy," she told the riveted group

-- probably a good decision, given her role in scuttling hopes for a national health care plan early in her husband's tenure. "I'm not here to talk about legislation. I'm here to say thank you for the support you have given me and the President over the last eight years."

This Democratic convention was beginning to look a lot like Philadelphia, where voters were invited to nosh on token gestures of inclusion as a no-cal substitute for real programs. Peter Mackler, who refers to himself as "unabashedly and proudly partisan" and serves as HIV policy advisor to California state senator John Burton (D), swallowed the liberal snacks whole. "The most significant occurrence at the convention," he told me, "is that Al Gore specifically mentioned AIDS in his acceptance speech. Sometimes we in the Democratic Party take that for granted, but at the Republican convention they only mentioned AIDS once, and that was in terms of family planning." While African-American leaders ripped into the vice-presidential nominee for his lack of enthusiasm for affirmative action and AFL-CIO organizers grumbled audibly about Gore's support for free trade, most AIDS advocates inside the main hall loyally closed ranks around the Democrats.

As protesters at the queer march slowly made their way downtown, whistling, chanting, drumming on huge water bottles and handing out fliers that read "Because the Democrats haven't taken action, we are forced to take action!" legislators from AIDS-hit districts worked the cool back rooms, pushing to keep the epidemic on the agenda from the inside. The presence of three openly positive elected officials, including New York State Senator Tom Duane, didn't hurt. (Curiously, a profile of Duane on the DNC website neglected to disclose that he is gay or HIV positive, Duane's two most public attributes.) Duane says that when he first read the draft party platform, it characterized AIDS only as a global crisis -- not a domestic one. With the help of two colleagues from New York and a sympathetic platform committee member, Duane got strong domestic language added. "Our nation must do all it can to focus its efforts on fighting HIV and AIDS," the final platform reads. "A top priority for Democrats will be the continued investment in research, prevention, care and treatment, and we are deeply committed to a search for a cure. Democrats continue to support important programs such as the Ryan White CARE Act, the Housing Opportunities for People with AIDS program, and incentives to return Americans with HIV/AIDS to work."

"It just goes to show you that you have to have a seat at the table to have a say," Duane said. "Just having [platform] inclusion at all is significant, especially since there's now a feeling in the general public that the AIDS crisis is over. Hello? One of my best friends is dying." Duane, a onetime ACT UPer, pointedly wore his pink and black SILENCE = DEATH pin each day, just to drive that point home.

The button may be a late '80s relic, but its spirit was very much alive on the L.A. streets. At several spots along the queer protest route, the 1,000 raucous marchers fell completely silent, on cue, each one holding a clenched fist in the air. The only sound during these hushed moments of mourning was the hum of the LAPD's low-flying helicopters.

"I found the left fist and silence so moving," says veteran L.A. AIDS activist Robin Podolsky. "It

demonstrated a new alliance between seasoned activists and young people, a sense of cooperation and trust.” Podolsky also said he felt “anguished,” because “I see a big difference between the Democrats and the Republicans, and the young people don’t.” For L.A. City AIDS Coordinator Ferd Eggan, the march was a tonic. “As a PWA, it made me feel more energized,” Eggan said. "And that hasn’t happened for a *long* time."

Despite all the feel-good unity out on the street and up on the dais (where Dems endlessly patted themselves on the back for choosing the first major-party Jewish candidate for veep), Malcolm Harris, senior coordinator for AMASSI, a South Los Angeles wellness center, was noticing a great divide. “It’s true the numbers of gay white men with HIV are going down,” he said, “but what’s happening with everyone else? We need to focus more on the African and the African-American community.” After he and I spent two long hours at a convention-eve Congressional Black Caucus town meeting without hearing a single mention of AIDS, it seemed the African-American epidemic, at least, had slipped from the spotlight.

But Harris had just returned from a Council for Africa satellite meeting that was all AIDS, all the time. The star-studded cast of speakers included Rev. Jesse Jackson, AIDS czar Sandy Thurman and former New York City Mayor David Dinkins, who’s now director of USAID’s Africa Bureau. Jackson, with his undeniable charisma, fired this group up when he said, “It’s morally unacceptable for the United States to ignore the plight of the 6,000 people now dying a day on the continent from complications of HIV/AIDS and the 10 million AIDS orphans living in Africa.” Speaker after speaker piled on praise for Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA), who initiated the five-year, $500 million AIDS Marshall Plan, which would establish a World Bank fund for AIDS prevention and care. A few days later, President Clinton signed the bill into law.

But with most AIDS talk shoved to the sidelines, it took Jesse Milan, Jr., 44, to bring the message into homes all over the world. Milan, who directs the National Prevention Information Network at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was asked by Thurman to join Tuesday night’s health care panel. Milan has been positive for 18 years and chose to make his way to the stage with a red ribbon on his lapel -- broadcasting a message to Americans and party leaders alike.

“I wanted to put a human face on AIDS,” Milan said, “so they could see an African American really articulate the issues in a politically charged context.” The sparkling lights and frantically waving signs all faded for Milan when a stranger approached him offstage. The woman said simply, “I am so proud of you and so grateful for what you did.” Then she began to cry. “I could read in her eyes she was trying to say more that she couldn’t express. I was honored that I had publicly expressed a concern in her heart.”

No doubt what she heard in Milan’s talk was an assertion that the AIDS crisis isn’t over, even here in the United States. That’s something the Democrats, with a push, will admit -- at least between now and November.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Down-and-Out-in-L-A-1401-3960