# Flower Children

People power blooms as HIVers march on the Capitol and an activist is born in Albany

July 1, 2002 By Kai Wright and Vanessa Johnson

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It’s springtime in Washington, DC: The cherry blossoms are in bloom, school kids are tumbling out of chartered buses, Congress has returned from recess to begin budget combat -- in other words, it’s rally season.

This year, HIVers were among the first to show. On April 10, several hundred people -- mostly African-American members of Philly and New York ACT UP -- massed on the Capitol’s lush West Lawn to bellow “Medication for every nation!” and other chants from the movement for global treatment access. AIDS advocates organized the rally to aim two demands at Congress: Boost this year’s paltry U.S. contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria by $750 million -- for a total of $1.2 billion -- and double international AIDS spending for the next fiscal year to $2.5 billion.

The gathering erupted when actor Danny Glover, whose long history of activism has made him an African-American community icon, stepped to the mic. Glover’s star power swelled the rally’s ranks, as enterprising chaperones allowed their curious young charges, fresh from Capitol tours, to witness political action in real time. Then Rep. John Conyers, a Michigan Democrat, got practical, urging activists to put the squeeze on congressional reps in their home districts. Bay Area Democrat Rep. Barbara Lee gave voice to the crowd’s indignation.

All for naught in the House, which stonewalled an emergency infusion to the Fund in May. Things looked slightly brighter in the Senate, where a bipartisan coalition added $200 million this year for international AIDS. Meanwhile, the Fund announced its first round of grants, awarding a meager $616 million -- about $15 for every person with AIDS worldwide -- over the next two years.

*-- Kai Wright*

Before my very first demonstration on April 9 in Albany, I had never been arrested. My life experience as a woman of color, mother of a teenager and my legal training had convinced me this was one experience to avoid at all costs. I was in full avoidance mode on the morning of the action, thinking I might be getting sick. I was -- from fear and anxiety. I called to check if an arrest would affect my admission to the New York State Bar. But I decided I wouldn’t chicken out over the phone. I would chicken out in person.

At the state capitol, I heard -- then saw -- hundreds of people marching with drums, whistles and

signs of every size and shape, chanting: “This is what democracy looks like!” I remembered why I’d come out to demonstrate at the age of 43, after 12 years of advocacy and prevention work with other PWAs. Just as the state budget entered final negotiations with cuts to AIDS services, the Health Department announced that 78 percent of newly diagnosed HIVers in New York are African American, Latino or Asian. I had taken a civil disobedience class. It was time for my actions to match my words.

I locked arms with State Assemblyman Roger Green and a colleague from Albany Medical Center. We marched in rows of five across the street to the capitol building. A group of activists sat in front of the revolving doors; we stood before them, forming a barricade. The crowd was still across the street, shouting about the budget and supporting the 60 of us. Eventually, state troopers told us to move or we would be placed under arrest. No one moved. They began to handcuff us one by one. As he was placing me under arrest, one trooper said to me, “I don’t know if I could be arrested, but I admire what you’re doing.”

*-- Vanessa Johnson*

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