Founder’s Letter

August 1, 2004 By Sean Strub

In May, for the second time, I was arrested at an AIDS demo in Washington, DC In one of the best organized actions I can remember, nearly 1,000 activists hit the streets to try and make AIDS an issue in the upcoming presidential election.

First stop was the Republican National Committee headquarters; next, its Democratic counterpart. Staff at each camp watched us from their windows, wary or curious. At the DNC, staffers raced from the building with flyers outlining John Kerry’s admirable record on AIDS issues. At the RNC, staffers were clearly entertained—as evidenced by bemused faces and pointed fingers. James Baldwin once wrote of the “laughter of those who consider themselves at a safe remove from the wretched, for whom the pain of living is not real.” This captures perfectly the reception at the RNC, as well as some tourists we encountered on our expressive stroll. Other than that, the day’s emphasis was on “civil” more than “disobedience.” Once in front of the Capitol, about 100 of us sat down in the street and were arrested for “unlawful assembly.” The police were conspicuously courteous. Some officers were overt in their sympathy for our cause. One volunteered that his sister died of AIDS. They laughed at our jokes, loosened too-tights plastic handcuffs and, during our six hours in jail, asked if we needed water or bathroom breaks.

Nothing could have been more different from my first DC arrest, at the White House, back in June 1987. That was a confrontation, with tension in the air and hostility emanating from the cops. Fearing contagion, *they* were the drama queens, ridiculously donning long yellow Playtex gloves. (This prompted us to taunt them with one of the all-time great demo chants: “Your gloves don’t match your shoes! You’ll see it on the news!”)

Other differences between the two arrests proved even more telling. Seventeen years ago, the 64 of us arrested were mostly prominent individuals: heads of major gay and AIDS organizations and so-called leaders of the community. In retrospect, I think some were present mainly because they had too much ego to miss being seen at an action they knew would be historic. Activist-photographer Jane Rosett referred to us as a “Who’s Who” of AIDS activism (see “Dressed for Arrest,” *POZ*, May 1997). Of course, many have since died, including my friends Stephen Gendin, Dan Bradley, Leonard Matlovich, Steve Endean and Jim Foster.

This year those arrested were, with a few exceptions, not the big names. They were people who are rarely quoted or profiled, people whose activism is not recognized with awards, people who have firsthand experience with not only AIDS but homelessness, addiction, poverty and racism. Their humility stood in marked contrast to the self-congratulatory pride we felt in 1987.

But we also felt desperate, and that is what got 64 of us off our asses in the first place. We protested both the Reagan administration, whose AIDS policy was one of utter neglect, and the pharmaceutical industry, which was then unwilling to listen and learn from us. This year, we feel no less desperate. We struggle more than ever for funding and leadership, but not against an inattentive administration. Far from neglecting us, President Bush has aggressively pursued policies that have terrifying ramifications for people with HIV. We are being criminalized by statute and legislation in virtually every state in the country. Control of prevention—the political "red meat" of AIDS—has been given to fundamentalist Christian pols more interested in saving souls than in saving lives. A "condoms don't work" message is now considered effective HIV prevention. Has America gone crazy?

The effect has been devastating. At the big demo in DC this was most obvious in the many so-called leaders who were no-shows. Through federal fiscal blackmail, the Bush administration has managed to muzzle most of the major AIDS service organizations, making them fearful of even *endorsing* a simple nonpartisan protest, as Tim Murphy reports in "Boiling Point," a photo essay of the demo. Their choice is a stark one: stay quiet and provide desperately needed services or speak out and face the very real risk of losing funding. Is it cowardice or compassion that keeps them quiet?

For my part, I am glad to be among the wretched—and not having to make such a choice.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Founder-s-Letter-395-8075