Founder’s Letter

Hope on the march

September 1, 2005 By Sean Strub

In one sobering week in July, three events crystallized for me why the massive Campaign to End AIDS (C2EA) march on the nation’s capital this October is so critical.

First, a Texas court ruled that the penis and blood of a man with HIV constituted “deadly weapons,” literally criminalizing parts of the bodies of people with HIV. Second, a prosecutor in Georgia filed felony charges against a man with HIV for failing to disclose his status to his sex partners. Finally, in South Africa, in a sadly terrifying milestone, police shot rubber bullets at PWAs who were demonstrating at a hospital, demanding HIV meds promised by the government.

It is now open season on people with AIDS. Long despised, briefly pitied, we are still (again) the receptacle of last resort for society’s fears and failings, the target for its anger and violence, the victims of its intolerance and greed.

And it’s going to get worse before it gets better. The perpetrators of these crimes against people with HIV are not only far-right fundamentalists or power-drunk cops—they include ambitious elected officials of all stripes and opportunistic gay activists trying to prove themselves better than those messy gays who get AIDS. Whether wielding stun guns or inflammatory rhetoric—that equates failing to disclose with attempted murder, for example—they are whipping the public discourse into an anti-PWA frenzy. Even our right to take pride and comfort in our own struggle for survival is under attack, as it presents an example that some believe contributes to spreading the disease by lessening fear of its impact.

The C2EA march on Washington, DC—spearheaded by Housing Works’ head and HIVer Charles King—is our opportunity to begin to turn this dangerous tide. And it is something more. I’ve been a political activist for 35 years—dating back to my days as a preteen when I participated in Hunger Hikes to raise money for FRELIMO (Freedom and Liberation in Mozambique)—and I’ve never seen a better organized, more truly democratic or genuinely grassroots effort on a scale like C2EA.

It is inspiring and, for me, humbling to participate. There’s nothing glamorous or fashionable about C2EA. It’s hard work—and it has been accomplished in spite of, rather than with the support of, the AIDS establishment. This march is by and for us. It is our Boston Tea Party, our Battle of Bunker Hill, our declaration that we are not going to take it anymore. It’s also our only hope of rekindling

an AIDS activist movement here at home to match what HIVers in the developing world have miraculously created.

We have spent 25 years fighting to keep ourselves alive, fighting to empower each other, fighting to enlighten and inspire the world. Yet still (again), we are told that we are the criminals, attacked in the media, even shot at by police.

The sick people have had enough of being treated like garbage. We can be hated, we can be jailed, we can be shot at. But we are going to fight back.

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