He The People

Kiyoshi Kuromiya 1943-2000

August 1, 2000 By Bob Lederer

We PWAs, diseased pariahs, are the future of America—fighting for a promise yet to be fully realized.

So said world-renowned AIDS advocate Kiyoshi Kuromiya, who died of the disease May 10 in Philadelphia. He was 57. His final decline was triggered by complications from chemo for anal cancer. Born behind barbed wire in a World War II internment camp for Japanese Americans, Kuromiya led a lifelong fight against injustice. Throughout the ’60s, he marched for civil rights, and he helped organize the country’s first gay rights demo in 1965. He opposed the Vietnam War, supported the Black Panthers, fought for gay liberation and spoke out in the Asian-American movement.

Long before testing positive in 1989, he was a passionate AIDS activist, cofounding ACT UP/Philadelphia and We the People, a PWA self-empowerment organization. Kuromiya was perhaps best known as the founder of the Critical Path AIDS Project, whose newsletter, website (www.critpath.org), free Internet access and 24/7 hotline have helped thousands of PWAs.

Kuromiya was a self-taught AIDS expert, traveling worldwide to track the latest data. An inveterate marijuana user (to forestall wasting), he also distributed the weed to other PWAs for free; a yoga master, he advocated research on alternative meds. He also fought for special attention to the needs of PWAs of color.

Below, fellow fighters shed light on this fallen giant.

REMEMBERING KIYOSHI

Julie Davids
ACT UP/Philadelphia
ACT UP/Philadelphia trained me to be an activist and an educator, and my most influential mentor in that over-10-year process was Kiyoshi. He gave me the foundation—in knowledge and attitude—to sustain this struggle. Kiyoshi quickly made you understand that there was something for everyone to do in confronting those responsible for fueling this epidemic.

Whenever I went to a meeting with Kiyoshi, he'd introduce me to the top researchers and activists. Then he'd whisper gossip about them in my ear. It was crucial information, and it also helped keep me awake.

No matter how many panels he served on, Kiyoshi still believed in the power of people in the streets. His final act of civil disobedience was against the U.S. Trade Representative last year in the fight to change U.S. policies that block access to drugs in poor countries. Kiyoshi was an AIDS activist not only because he was living with HIV, but because it was something that needed to be done.

Charles Nelson
National Association of People With AIDS (NAPWA)
Kiyoshi was an articulate, tenacious, principled and stubborn leader. He placed a public Asian face on AIDS and continuously called attention to the many challenges that the epidemic posed for disenfranchised communities. Kiyoshi taught loudest through his actions, such as his relentless fight for inclusion of prisoners and Asians in the first national study of PWA health services.

Ronald Sy
AIDS Services in Asian Communities
At the forefront of the civil rights and AIDS movements, Kiyoshi refused to believe that Asians were apolitical, silent or unwilling to question authority. He always made sure that the needs of Asians and Pacific Islanders for prevention and services weren't forgotten by local HIV planning councils. Kiyoshi has inspired many and will continue to inspire future generations of activists. A great light has gone out, but in its wake has left a multitude of candles burning.

Bob Roehr
AIDS/gay journalist
Kiyoshi was a walking oral history book. Once, he and I stumbled upon an exhibit about the civil rights movement, and each display case evoked another chapter in Kiyoshi's life story: playing "America the Beautiful" again and again at a restaurant sit-in in Maryland; being bashed to the edge of death by deputies while registering voters in Alabama; caring for the children of Martin Luther King Jr. while that slain leader's funeral was planned. He also spoke of his role in the anti–Vietnam War protests at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, where his short hair, coat and tie were cover to drive supplies through police lines to the demonstrators.

Anthony Fauci, MD
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
Kiyoshi was an important contributor to several advisory committees of my institute. I had the pleasure of interacting with him frequently on HIV community issues. He was quick to question (but never obstructionist), highly intelligent and totally committed.

Chuck Thomas
Marijuana Policy Project
Kiyoshi bravely bucked the law to distribute medical marijuana to PWAs, and even testified in

Washington, DC, about his own appetite-stimulating use of it. Armed with extensive scientific knowledge and a lovable demeanor, he spoke passionately at government hearings, helping to provoke last year's landmark Institute of Medicine report recommending marijuana for pain and nausea.

John S. James
AIDS Treatment News
One of Kiyoshi's most important contributions to history may be his fight against Internet censorship. As a lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against the Christian Coalition–initiated Communications Decency Act, he forced government lawyers to admit that if this law stood, he could be prosecuted for providing AIDS prevention info on the Critical Path website. The Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional.

Rachel Maddow
Advocate for PWA prisoners
Kiyoshi saw prisoners as an integral part of the HIV community: His hotline accepted collect calls; he sent prisoners free subscriptions to Critical Path; and he gave day-to-day support and friendship to countless positive prisoners, particularly Greg Smith, falsely convicted of attempted murder by biting. Through these simple, generous steps, Kiyoshi showed that any AIDS organization—even a single activist—can be a lifeline to HIVers behind bars.

Lark Lands
***POZ* Science Editor**
All of us were inspired by Kiyoshi's constant commitment to justice. But I will most remember his inimitable ways of moving in the world. His dedication brought him to every major speech at every AIDS conference, hoping for another morsel of knowledge that might help someone in need, even when he was tired or ill or could likely present the material better himself. His irresistible sense of humor surfaced in the sly looks, the almost suppressed smiles and—when he could no longer resist—the witty comment that sent the rest of us off into helpless gales of laughter. Finally, his huge, passionate heart wrapped up so many people and made us feel that the world was a better place because he was in it.

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