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We need grass-roots activism as much today as when ACT UP began

March 1, 1997 By Sean Strub

Last December, I got a call from a TV news producer. The White House had just released its so-called “National AIDS Strategy.” The produce asked, “Doesn’t this report sound like the president has embraced the goals of ACT UP?” I explained that he had done no such thing, that the document was yet another elaborate (and sadly familiar) public-relations con-a clever repackaging of existing do-little policies and lofty rhetoric.

But her question reminded me of how far we’ve come in the decade since ACT UP began-and how far we’ve yet to go. In June 1987, when I was arrested in front of the White House, along with 63 others demanding AIDS action, Ronald Reagan had only the night before-six years into the exploding epidemic-given his first AIDS speech. His AIDS policies were an evil brew of malign neglect and cruel stigmatization. Talk of quarantine was in the air. The FDA took forever to approve drugs. Researchers ran pitifully few-often unethical or repetitive-trials, with no community input. The few promising drugs were priced beyond greed.

These were the outrages that pushed me, and thousands of others, to join ACT UP. It was an exciting time of my life, when I became part of this surging energy of angry, creative people determined to stop the dying. What we accomplished was nothing short of amazing. Not only did we change many horrendous AIDS policies of government, science and industry, but our actions raised the whole country’s consciousness and compassion-to such an extent that now most politicans at least give lip service to our goals.

ACT UP also laid the groundwork for a new generation of community-based institutions to fight AIDS. *POZ* is one of those. It sprang out of my desire to simplify, popularize and broadly disseminate the huge volume of life-sustaining information-and inspiration-I had already found critical to my own survival.

So today, while the form of my activism has changed, I am as proud as ever of my ACT UP days. And my commitment to the ideals of nonviolent direct action to radically change the health care/wealth care monstrocity has only grown stronger. From the sky-high prices of drugs to the cruel slashing of social services to the genocidal tragedy of the continuing Clinton/Shalala HIV infections caused by their needle-exchange cowardice, it’s clear we need grass-roots activism as much today as when ACT UP began.

It’s not just about getting access to a drug or saving our own lives. It’s about helping this country forge a new commitment to care and compassion and, in the process, rediscover our own humanit and ability to love each other.

More than ever before, silence=death.

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