Tabling the Situation

Activist Eric Sawyer balances chairs, birth order and brownstones

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His words issue like rapid fire: “I’m Eric Sawyer from ACT UP/New York and these are our issues we should have been invited but we weren’t where’s my chair?” More than once in the epidemic’s early years, Eric Sawyer crashed government meetings with similar introductory comments. “I’m a workaholic and I’m a pit bull,” says the 42-year-old, darkly handsome veteran activist, his soft voice punctuated by growling bursts. "I have strong conviction and an unwillingness to hear people say no. I’ve been called a son of a bitch, a diva and probably a lot worse. But it’s those tactics-the work of the Vito Russos and the Michael Callens-that got AIDS activism a seat at the table.

Sawyer grew up in rural upstate New York, the son of a truck driver and a homemaker who raised two older sons and two younger daughters. “The family joke is that I was the transition,” Sawyer quips. After graduate school in Denver, Sawyer decided to move to New York “after I’d slept with everyone I was attracted to in my hometown.” After working full-time for 14 years in public administration and management consulting, Sawyer “retired” on disability in 1991. “I had my first HIV test in 1985, but I asked the doctor not to give me the results, just a T-cell count, which was 500.” Sawyer didn’t actually know he was positive until two years later.

Activism became Sawyer’s passion in 1986 when his second partner died of AIDS. “I always enjoyed a certain level of social and economic privilege; I felt [activism] was my responsibility,” Sawyer says firmly. “But it was also self-motivated and inner-directed. I needed access to treatments to survive, and I was angry about the lack of research, particularly on opportunistic infections.” During the ensuing 10 years, Sawyer’s tenacity earned him a who’s who-style resume: He cofounded ACT UP and Housing Works, organized protests about HIV positive Cubans detained at Guantanamo Bay, helped secure housing assistance for Haitian refugees, served on the board of the Global Network of People With AIDS and helped the UN and WHO with numerous activists and conferences.

Sitting in the homey Harlem brownstone he shares with two slinky black cats and his partner of four years, Sawyer recounts his surprise at the movement’s early success: “When ACT UP chapters started springing up all over the country and the world, we realized we’d spawned a health care movement”; and disappointments with its failures: “We thought we’d get condom distribution in the high schools. We still haven’t won that battle.” Sawyer is typically blunt about how things today could be better. “I wish we didn’t spend so much time fighting among ourselves-that there

was more cooperation among people in the AIDS community. There’s still a big dichotomy between the PWA movement and the AIDS community movement, which is driven by service organizations whose agendas are often self-perpetuation and the protection of their budgets.”

Sawyer admits his hectic schedule intrudes all too often on activities such as training at the gym, seeing movies and theater, and going to the symphony or the ballet. It’s a place at his own kitchen table that now seems to be missing. “I sometimes wish I had less responsibility,” he says, his tone tinged with guilt. “I wish I had more time to spend with my husband.”

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