The Way We Live Now: Mario Cooper

Founder, Leading For Life

May 1, 1999 By Mario Cooper

Remembrances, anniversaries, even memorial services produce conflicting emotions for me. I struggle, especially at AIDS events, to maintain a proper balance between solemnity and optimism. My family owns a funeral home that serves the black community in Mobile, Alabama, so I grew up with exposure to death. Like the Irish, African Americans have made an art of celebrating life after a funeral: food, drink and small talk at wakes and afterward are a rite of passage for those mourning.

While we are sadly a long way from “waking” AIDS, we should respect and celebrate the gay community’s response to the epidemic. For example, under ACT UP’s visionary leadership and aggressive action, patients now have a voice in the approval process for new drugs, and the FDA approval procedure is now significantly shorter. The important Ryan White CARE Act, initially created to provide limited assistance to mostly urban areas disproportionately impacted by AIDS, is another example of success.

Thousands of HIV-impacted families walk through the doors of AIDS service centers every day. Thousands receive food provided, packed and delivered by gay people. Over the past 20 years, thousands of us have volunteered at “buddy” programs, testing centers and counseling sites. Additionally, we have forever changed the public health approach to prevention, as activists insured that prevention campaigns were based on input from the affected communities. That had the effect of decreasing HIV infection rates among gay men.

I am mystified that these accomplishments are not more acknowledged. We must recognize our successes. Failure to do so diminishes them and undercuts our shared commitment to end this horrid epidemic for the entire world.

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