Tribute: Keith Cylar

AIDS Warrior - 1958-2004

July 1, 2004 By Nina Herzog

It was standing-room only at the Harlem church funeral for Keith Cylar—HIVer, activist and cofounder of Housing Works, New York's largest AIDS service provider. Cylar's relentless struggle on behalf of homeless HIVer New Yorkers ended on April 5, when he died in his sleep from an enlargement of the heart, at 45.

After losing a lover to AIDS, Keith joined ACT UP in the late '80s, where he met his life and work partner, Charles King. "It was a fearful and dark time," Keith once told an interviewer. "If you were mentally ill or a drug user…nobody treated you with respect." With King and ACT UPers Ginny Shubert and Eric Sawyer, he helped launch Housing Works.

A visionary advocate, Keith developed HIV legislation that enabled modern-day service programs. He was demanding and forgiving, attacking yet comforting. He was a collage of contradictions: an impeccable three-piece suit (from a Housing Works' thrift shop) with a small BBQ stain, scholarly glasses perched crookedly on his face. He sold drugs to put himself through Columbia social-work school. Keith loved being alive and described the dance floor as the only place he felt truly free.

Keith was everything the world dismisses—dyslexic, queer, black and HIV positive for more than 20 years. But he was too powerful to dismiss: an entrepreneur, a respected researcher, a member of numerous boards, including the National Harm Reduction Coalition, and a talented clinician who helped house more than 15,000 HIV positive New Yorkers. King eulogized him as an "AIDS warrior." While the war still rages, Keith can finally rest, knowing he helped win so many battles.

To learn about the Keith Cylar Activist Fund, visit www.housingworks.org.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Tribute-Keith-Cylar-352-5788