Where There’s Smoke There Must Be Fire

Fighting for a dozen causes, Kiyoshi Kuromiya has been a one-man movement for longer than the personal has been political. But just who is the person behind the politics? What moves the movement?

February 1, 1996 By Evan Forster

It’s rush hour. Kiyoshi Kuromiya and I jump into a taxi on Lombard Street, in Philadelphia. “The Atlantic building at South and Broad, please, and let me tell you the route,” commands this 52-year-old Japanese-American with an unselfish authority that, coming from someone else, might incite rather than relieve a harried taxi driver during the rush. Kuromiya has the peaceful effect one might attribute to the unassuming good shepherd who in the end turns out to be a Gandhi. “Make a left here and pull over to the mailbox,” he continues, his calm belying the number of tasks to be done between now and when we reach our final destination. “Thank you.” He hops out. Tosses the letter into the mail. Flies back into the taxi. "I have to drop something off at *Au Courant*,“ he tells me, making sure to include the driver in the conversation about why he’s stopping at the offices of the Philadelphia gay newspaper: ”They’re doing an article on being gay and Asian and I have to give them some information. Stop right over here for a moment. Thank you." He jumps out again. We watch as the small veteran activist bounds through a storefront doorway.

“Your friend’s got a lot of energy.” The driver’s now grinning.

“Yes, he does,” I answer, wondering what the driver would say if he knew Kuromiya has a T-cell count somewhere below a hundred and a viral load booming at well over a million.

Kuromiya leaps back into the cab. “You can take Spruce and then left on Broad.” We’re finally on our way to the executive meeting of the Philadelphia AIDS Consortium, which we’ll have to leave early so Kuromiya can be home in time for a conference call with the ad hoc advisory committee to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on alternative and complementary AIDS therapies, not to mention the all-night calls from PWAs with questions about anything from treatments to services. No problem. He plans to be up most of the night anyway responding to the 200 or more pieces of e-mail that pour daily into the Web site of his virtually one-man operation, Critical Path AIDS Project, which publishes a quarterly newsletter and maintains a 24-hour hotline for treatment and service issues.

Kiyoshi Kuromiya, AIDS treatment activist, is certainly a very busy man. But does he have a life?

The last film he saw was *Jurassic Park*.

It's hardly surprising when you realize that the better part of most of his days is spent sealed in the hermetic confines of his tiny apartment, crammed with reams of papers on AIDS and books on anything from Architecture to Asian American issues. He's flanked by several computers, a copy machine -- and somewhere beneath the rubble -- a twin-size bed that looks like it hasn't been made since Kuromiya left it to attend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington in 1963.

As Kuromiya answers each phone call and mans the Web site, one begins to wonder if the last film he really caught wasn't *Operation Liberation*, a propaganda film produced by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s. Kuromiya's Monrovia, California high school screened it for a small group of students in the school's accelerated program -- at their request. The film backfired on its commie-fearing makers and left the group even more liberal. (Kuromiya's class was the last to have the accelerated program.) To this day, Kuromiya thanks the government for helping him to see things a bit more clearly and believes the film may have been the catalyst for his entry into activism.

Or, could his activism simply be the result of his Wyoming birth, surrounded by the breathtaking beauty of Heart Mountain and the carefully laid barbed wire that "protected" his family and thousands of other Japanese-Americans from the rest of the United States during World War II?

After the war, the 120,000 Japanese-Americans wrongfully imprisoned by the U.S. government were released and Kuromiya's family returned to California. Early on, Steve -- Kiyoshi's the middle name he opted to use as his first when "we were all getting back to our roots" -- seemed a bit different to his rather conservative Christian parents. At an unusually early age, he spent much of his time in solitude, immersed in books. By nine he had completed a year's study of Philadelphia.

Why Philadelphia?

In hindsight, Kuromiya says, "It may be something as vague as being intrigued by the idea of a 'City of Brotherly Love' in the only colony where religious freedom and freedom of thought were guaranteed. It was a place where revolutionaries could accomplish quite a bit." Of course this wasn't the only oddity about the "eldest son of the eldest son of the eldest son," in a family of Japanese nobility that dates its name back more than 500 years. "I knew I was different in about 20 ways from the other children I knew. It's one of the reasons I began to sneak off to the county library to read the *Kinsey Reports*." After a while, however, he decided to stop reading about his differences and do what any budding treatment activist would do: Experiment.

Picture an 11-year-old boy being picked up by the police in Monrovia Park for sexually corrupting a 16 year old. Kuromiya says he was "physically quite mature for his age." Apparently the judge who sentenced him thought so, too. Kuromiya spent the next three days "getting all kinds of dates" in Los Angeles Juvenile Hall. His parents, meanwhile, were completely shamed and devastated, with

no way of knowing that their son would go on to do great things someday -- 3,000 miles away, like many gay Asians who prefer to leave home rather than “disgrace the family.”

This past summer, in response to activists’ demands, Kuromiya was a last minute addition to the NIH’s 15-member AIDS Research Evaluation Working Group, the only PWA of color on this panel reviewing the $1.4 billion federal AIDS research program. Why Kiyoshi Kuromiya? Who better to understand the needs of the community than a treatment activist with a vast history of community service that dates back to the anti-war and civil rights movements of the ’60s and later includes original membership in ACT UP/Philadelphia?

Still, Kuromiya’s not always a welcome addition to a medical/scientific group that often views him as more of a hindrance than a help. But he is certainly a necessary one. Kuromiya’s is the voice stressing the need for research on “alternative therapies like gene therapy and treatments in wide use in the community such as medical marijuana.”

Studying use of this “illegal” substance is, of course, not exactly high on the NIH agenda. Like many others, Kuromiya swears by his “inhaled therapy,” the term he uses for smoking marijuana to bolster his appetite and his nutritional intake and ultimately combat wasting syndrome. “Most people [who die of AIDS] die of malnutrition. It’s amazing that the ACTG [AIDS Clinical Trials Group] has never done a study on nutrition in PWAs. We know for a fact that weight loss is a perfect barometer for the correlation between disease progress and death.”

Holding unpopular views is merely de rigueur for a man whose résumé includes a beating by the Montgomery, Alabama sheriff in 1965 during a civil rights march on the state capital, helping that same year to organize the first ever gay rights march in U.S. history and interrogations by the Secret Service for his involvement in the anti-war protest at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968 -- not to mention his 1967 threat to napalm a dog in the middle of an Ivy League campus.

Napalm a dog?

In the spring of 1967 a flyer circulated through the streets of Philadelphia which read, “On Friday at noon on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania we will use napalm on a defenseless dog to illustrate the horrors of this weapon. Innocent Vietnamese are being burned alive by the jelly-like gasoline, paid for by your U.S. tax dollars,” recalls the man who signed the announcement as the “Ameri-Cong.” “The mayor and the police chief made all kinds of threats against whoever was doing this. The ASPCA made angry statements in the news and Sen. Joseph Clark made a public statement denouncing the action.”

When 2,000 people gathered on the appointed day, instead of witnessing the burning of a dog, they were handed flyers which read: “Congratulations. You have just saved the life of a dog. Now, how about saving the lives of thousands of innocent people in Vietnam?” Never before had so many people turned out for an anti-war demonstration in Philadephia.

Such protests were a staple of Kuromiya’s life as an undergraduate architecture student. A

member of Students for a Democratic Society, founder of the Gay Liberation Front in Philadelphia and frequent organizer of press conferences on Asian issues, he was also closely involved with Martin Luther King, Jr. and an active supporter of the Black Panthers and a host of women's rights organizations. Oddly enough, when not organizing or protesting, Kuromiya was spending considerable time in Philadelphia's finest restaurants and theaters, doing research as editor of *The Collegiate Guide to Greater Philadelphia* -- one of the most popular guides to the city -- which he created. Add to this absurd number of commitments Kuromiya's tendency to ignore basic curriculum requirements (opting instead for honors graduate courses) and it's no wonder that he never got an undergraduate degree.

The equivalent of graduate work in Kuromiya's life progressed in a similarly unconventional manner. Instead of enrolling at a university, he did so with an individual: R. Buckminster Fuller. "In 1977, having just had the upper lobe of my left lung removed due to seminoma cancer, I was lying in my hospital bed and for some reason I got the impression that he was in the next room," says Kuromiya of the admittedly bizarre path that led him to the architect/inventor/philosopher who would, more than any other individual, profoundly influence his life. "For several years I had been using his geodesic map -- the only map that shows all of the earths' surface with no distortion -- to track ley lines or dragon trails to connect the earth's different energy points that I had seen in dreams," says Kuromiya, referring to his use of an Eastern philosophical practice which places one's dreams within the context of waking life. His use of the maps, interest in Fuller's books and the fact that the architect did end up in the hospital for emergency prostate surgery a day after Kuromiya's vision, were the series of signs that finally led Kuromiya to volunteer at the architect's office.

Within a few months, Fuller recognized Kuromiya's uncanny ability to accurately transcribe and make sense of his architectural and philosophical ramblings. For the next five years Kuromiya flew all over the world with Bucky (as Fuller became known to him), never leaving his side until the architect's death in 1983. In that time, Kuromiya helped organize and record the last four books that Fuller would write. Interestingly, he was credited on the covers, not as editor or co-author, but as Fuller's "adjuvant," which, Kuromiya says, "is a medical term specifically used in immunology to describe something that provides a superior immune response." Kuromiya chuckles at the notion, modestly dismissing any application to himself.

While he might believe in dragon paths or ley lines, Kuromiya sees almost no prophetic connection between Fuller's description of him as an "adjuvant" and the AIDS work that he began long before his own positive test result in 1989. In fact, when asked to describe himself or his role in the fight against AIDS, Kuromiya avoids the question entirely and shifts the conversation back to Fuller.

"I'm much more impressed with how Bucky described himself as being an ordinary person who could accomplish a rather large task simply by applying himself to a particular problem. It's why humans are here in the universe: To gather information and to solve problems. It's the order of Fuller's concept, the Critical Path. First things come first, step by step. That way we can do things that we think of as being impossible. Like the space program, for example." Although Kuromiya adopted the name Critical Path for his AIDS treatment and service organization, he never seems to

consciously make the connection between his own seemingly insurmountable task as an AIDS treatment activist of color -- whose job requires not only fighting for broader research, but also getting treatment to underserved populations such as people of color, prisoners, adolescents, women and rural communities -- and sending a man to the moon and back.

It's 5:30 p.m. as we leave The Philadelphia AIDS Consortium executive committee meeting where Kuromiya not only cast his vote concerning a Ryan White Title One issue but discreetly distributed medical marijuana and received a small bag of protease inhibitors. We head down Broad Street and enter the offices of We The People, a multicultural organization that Kuromiya and his longtime friend and roommate, the late Temple Minner, began as a small storefront drop-in center for PWAs in 1988. (It is now the nation's largest PWA membership coalition and has served over 40,000 hot meals since its creation.) The people here are mostly from underserved populations and may not be familiar with Critical Path concepts, but they clearly sense the gravity and power behind the unassuming facade of the 5'6" Asian gentleman at my side.

"My son's on AZT and his T-cell count is dropping below 100," says a calm but desperate black man to Kuromiya.

"AZT? I'd try to get him on an AZT/3TC combination," Kuromiya says. "I'm not making a recommendation, but I'd ask the doctor about it and then look for a protease inhibitor."

"Thank you."

"If you have any more questions, you know Critical Path's hotline number. If I'm not there it has a beeper number and you can page me and I'll try to help you."

He takes Kuromiya's hand. "I appreciate it."

Kuromiya's not comfortable with this small physical display of gratitude, let alone with the 10 more minutes of it coming from several others before we're back in a taxi on our way back to his apartment -- or rather, on our way to pick up some pamphlets at a printer and whatever else Kuromiya's got to attend to. He's leaving in the morning for a meeting in San Francisco of the ad hoc panel on complementary and alternative therapies and of course, while he's there, a brief stop at the Cannabis Buyers Club.

While I'm interviewing Kuromiya, the White House is holding an AIDS summit to review its commitment to the war on this disease, or as the treatment activist puts it, "the biggest health care crisis of the century -- for which Clinton refuses to commit the same level of financial resources as he has for hurricanes and earthquakes." So, I'm thinking as he goes on to call health care "the new civil rights battleground," can we refer to Kiyoshi Kuromiya as a full-time activist?"

"No. No. Labels like that are much too limiting to describe what one's life is about," Kuromiya is quick to say. He prefers to think of himself as a "comprehensivist." "It's Fuller's term for young people because they're interested in everything and they haven't been *de-geniused*," he says. "They haven't been put through an educational mill and made to specialize in a particular field,

making them inflexible experts who are often unable to see how other seemingly unrelated areas impact on the area in which they're doing their specialized research."

Several minutes later, he's still paraphrasing Fuller when I interrupt. "Do you miss him?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Fuller. Do you miss him?"

Silence. It feels as if I've crossed into a restricted area. Almost clinically, Kuromiya begins to speak again.

"I think of Fuller as being a very special person -- as if you had access to someone like Ben Franklin. But let me be really honest: No, not particularly. On the other hand I don't miss Temple Minner, either." He notices my surprise. "I could get bogged down in all of that very easily, in all of the people I've known who are no longer with us, but I prefer to make sure I get every ounce out of what's alive and vital and interesting and important and useful now, and look at the people who are still alive," Kuromiya continues, not as a bubbling optimist but as a realist -- the one label he's willing to give himself. "After all, I'm not the only one who's still alive. There are a lot of people who were infected when I was infected." (Sometime between '79 and '81, he speculates.) And then, satisfying any unanswered questions, he adds, "I mean, I made the circuit of the same bathhouses in LA, San Francisco and New York as they did."

I know for many people it would be like a gaping wound that would never heal," Kuromiya says with a slight shrug when I ask why he's never had a long-term relationship, "but for the most part I'm very independent and eccentric, so I don't know if that would be my cup of tea, anyway." He seems to have dismissed the subject -- not just with me, but entirely, as if there were no time for it. I can't help but wonder if there's something I'm not getting. "Perhaps it's a cultural thing," he says with a grin, as if he's read my mind. "You know, being of Asian descent, there's a stereotype that we're very reserved and not very emotional."

Unemotional? Independent? No long-term relationships? Oh, really? So what about this current relationship with Kris, a 20-year-old temptation Kuromiya met on the street?

One fated eve, following a chi-chi AIDS fundraiser, Kuromiya, decked in a tux, met Kris -- whose wife, it turns out, was giving birth that same starry night. "They were in trouble. They were just starting out. They were homeless," Kuromiya says. And while his brief physical relationship with Kris amounted to very little, Kuromiya realized, "Kris and his family needed a place to stay and I tended to need someone around before I went batty like a hermit."

So what started out as a street pickup, then quickly moved into a no-room-at-the-inn/away-in-a-manger tale, was *actually* Critical Path problem-solving incarnate? "Really the situation worked out like a dream. We were people helping one another." Kiyoshi had the space. Kris and Danielle needed a home -- not to mention someone who could help take care of their infant, Krista.

"It's a rare experience that most gay men are cheated out of," Kuromiya says of his time spent

nurturing Krista for the first three years of her life. “She keeps the same kind of hours as I do,” he says, an unusual grin momentarily replacing his face’s usual sobriety. “So, early on Sunday mornings, before anyone else is awake, we often sit on the front steps and sing songs to each other.” The smile fades. “But that was before they moved into Danielle’s mother’s house.” Six weeks ago Kris had emergency surgery due to a brain aneurysm, “...and there’s the possibility the three might not come back here.”

“Do you miss the baby?”

“No. No, I don’t miss her. I’m glad to have been able to have that experience.” Kuromiya folds his arms.

The questions are getting too personal again, but it’s late. Somewhere past midnight. I’ve exhausted all of the questions about his work as a treatment activist and all of the thousand other AIDS-related programs and services that fill his 24-hour days. What I really want to find out is who Kiyoshi Kuromiya is, so I press on.

“Do you ever get lonely? I mean, is it difficult not having someone in your life, a significant-”

The phone rings.

“Excuse me for just one moment.” He picks it up, answering the third call to interrupt our interview in the past hour. “Yes, this is Kiyoshi.” He listens for a moment. “You might want to mention to your doctor that a friend suggested you look into getting a spinal tap....They take a small needle and insert it between the vertebrae and draw out spinal fluid to check for the fungus....Yes, I know, but it’s not as scary as it seems. In fact it’s relatively painless...”

He’s at ease once more, calmly answering the late-night questions of a frightened PWA.

Observing the instant change in Kuromiya’s demeanor finally makes me realize the lunacy of my line of questioning.

Lonely? Kuromiya’s much too busy to be lonely. Too busy to be concerned with whether there’s a significant other in his life. He’s busy helping people, the many significant others in his life: At We The People, in buyers clubs, on the Web and on the street. Busy solving problems. One step at a time.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Where-There-s-Smoke-There-Must-Be-Fire-1777-1016