You Schmooze, You Lose

Frank Pizzoli ducks behind the White House drapes

February 1, 2001 By Frank Pizzoli

There we were in the Indian Treaty Room of the Old Eisenhower Executive Office Building, right across the street from the White House, to celebrate the year 2000's reauthorization of the Ryan White CARE Act. Years ago, my cousin Danny used to say: "Did you hear about the Eisenhower doll? You wind it up and it sits on its ass for eight years."

The activists, Hill rats and elected pols gathered in the room by AIDS czar Sandy Thurman -- she styled us "Champions" in her elegant invitations -- hadn't been sitting on their behinds in the past year. In the spirit of the room's name, we'd made a patchwork of treaties in order to prevent and treat the worst epidemic in history. Let's hope we honor them better than our forebears did theirs with Native Americans.

Unlike Eisenhower dolls, once the reauthorization soldiers were wound up, we marched around writing letters, asking others to write letters and making phone calls in order to get the job done. We were successful. The third five-year CARE Act was finally passed.

Yet I wasn't feeling like much of a champion that evening. True, I was impeccably turned out in Republican drag -- a dark double-breasted suit, white-like-heaven shirt, silk tie and shined-to-death shoes. But my feet hurt from the constant tingle of neuropathy. I was afraid to eat the *hors d'oeuvres* because I had no idea where I'd find a bathroom. I walked out into the empty hallway that stretched on and on in every direction. I belched, hoping the sound wouldn't rumble over to an insulted Congress where they'd likely vote to undo everything for which we had worked so hard.

Back in the room, I turned to greet Ms. Thurman. She is a snappy dresser. A group of pharmaceutical-industry suits moved into our klatch as Thurman and I were exchanging an escalating litany of thank-yous. Right then I wished I'd worn an adult diaper over my suit -- as a reminder to our drug-company reps of just how much more we need to refine anti-HIV treatments.

In another corner of the room stood two studly young gents I'd met at last year's Gay Men's Health Summit, where we dove into the thorny question of why some gay men their age have moved away from safer-sex practices. One argument says that anti-HIV drugs have made the disease "invisible" -- if you can't "see" it, you can't "get" it. I wanted to pull up my right pants leg in a hip-hop fashion gesture. That way these guys could see my KS lesions. (At a private sex party I once

attended, no one cared that I was HIV positive -- but one guy suggested I wear Band-Aids so no one would be “offended” by my spots.) Maybe if we played connect the dots, some answers to these perplexing questions would be revealed. I do know that when they can see AIDS, gay men get unnerved.

Then I looked up into the rounded, ornate ceiling of the treaty room, full of as many colors as the human race. The longer I stared, all the mosaic pieces glazed over and reassembled into an image of the AIDS quilt. At the last display, I could not see to the end of the weeping blanket -- and it represented only 12 percent of the dead then, in 1996. It looked like an enormous drug patch on the belly of the planet, exhausted by its work. Beneath the domed ceiling, the room’s chatter softened. Staff collected tiny dishes and empty wine goblets. Small groups whispered secret plans. New coalitions were being born. Now that we’ve reauthorized our HIV law, I hope we can renew our resolve.

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