Beyond Ourselves

November 13, 2017 By Alicia Green

"I actually had just come to visit a friend," recalls advocate Jesús Aguais of a 1989 vacation to New York that turned into a permanent residency after he fell in love with the Big Apple's ambience. Soon after, the Venezuelan native became involved in AIDS work through ACT UP.

"My calling was to help others, and that's what I do," he says. "It so happens that HIV was the thing that awakened my mission in life."

Following a brief stint as a counselor at the Hispanic AIDS Forum, he spent 12 years with the AIDS program at the now-closed St. Vincent's Hospital. When the protease inhibitors saquinavir and ritonavir emerged on the market, Aguais noticed that people were discarding the expensive drugs because of side effects. This inspired him to start Aid for AIDS (AFA) in 1996.

"I started asking my clients to bring their medicine back to me when they switched," explains Aguais, who remains AFA's executive director. "That's how it was born." Today, the international organization provides free antiretroviral meds (ARVs) to people living with HIV in 43 countries around the world through its HIV Medicine Recycling Program.

One of those countries is Aguais's native Venezuela, which is in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. Because of a severe medicine shortage, AFA has been working diligently to help Venezuela's 73,000 citizens who take ARVs receive their crucial treatment.

"What we have proved in these past 20 years is the power of people," Aguais says. "The medicine you have in your cabinet that you stopped using for any reason can save somebody's life tomorrow."

In addition, a lack of food is prompting Venezuelan mothers with HIV to put their HIV-negative babies at risk by breast-feeding while not on treatment. AFA is in the process of creating infant formula for these mothers.

His other concern is the high prevalence of HIV among the country's indigenous Warao people. "I'm writing grants to international agencies to get the funding to provide services to the Warao people," Aguais says. "The pace at which they are dying of AIDS-related causes is shameful."

The events that have unfolded in Venezuela have motivated Aguais to start a response center in Panama through the United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot, which procures, stores and transports emergency supplies on behalf of the humanitarian community. The goal is to eliminate

ARV shortages in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Aguais wants the HIV community to become involved. “Let’s look at life beyond ourselves,” he pleads. “There are people around the world who need our help. We can make a difference.”

Go to aidforaids.org to learn how to help.

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