Through Darkness, We Must Always See the Light

Adapting the lessons of AIDS to fight COVID-19.

April 20, 2020 By John Cunningham

April 2020 marks 40 years since the first case of AIDS in San Francisco was seen, though not understood for what it would portend. That, along with other early occurrences, were moments in time that invisibly changed who we were as a nation and shaped, in many ways, what we have become today.

Now, as we wake up and see a nation and world torn apart by COVID-19, the dark days from the height of the AIDS pandemic do not seem so long ago.

For those of us who have lived through and survived that horrific time, we can't help but see the parallels to the present day. And, with great pain, we can't help but ask ourselves, what did we really learn from it all?

Like so many reading this, the feelings of fear and concern permeate every cell of my body.

As during the AIDS crisis, it is difficult to see politicians stigmatize a disease, inciting fear and discrimination, putting countless lives at greater risk and doing nothing to reduce the health threat. As we knew then, and know today, a virus does not discriminate against an ethnic group or region of the world, and neither should we.

It's hard not to feel rage as we once again watch the cavalier inaction of a president and other politicians who scoffed at the very warnings that should have shaped our nation's initial response and loss of life.

It's unacceptable for our government to be caught off guard, as it was with AIDS, by the scope and severity of a pandemic coming to a health system unprepared to handle a mass influx of patients.

And, today, we stand by, hoping that our friends and loved ones will not get sick, as we know there is not a cure on the horizon yet. We wait, anticipating something miraculous will happen just in time.

That anxiety and gut-wrenching heartbreak are just as real today as when we watched helplessly,

not being able to save our loved ones dying of AIDS. That pain, those feelings, just never go away.

But through all of this, as we did then, we see hope and an army of heroes rising up to reassure us there will be a brighter tomorrow.

Top of mind and in our hearts are the thousands of nurses, doctors and other medical professionals who each and every day put their own lives at risk, bringing love and dedication to caring for the ill, comforting the dying, and seeking treatments.

As well, we see so many in our communities reaching out, helping each other, sometimes in the simplest of ways, to show they care.

During the height of the AIDS pandemic in San Francisco, it was this sense of community that helped so many of us survive. While we all coped and managed in individual ways, it was community that came together to create a memorial Quilt that not only told stories of loved ones lost, but would go on to spark a desperately needed social justice movement.

It was community that created an AIDS Memorial Grove in Golden Gate Park, eventually designated our National AIDS Memorial, as a space in nature for grieving and healing together.

Through crisis, we asked ourselves then: How do we stay healthy? What can we do? How do we take action? How do we comfort and heal? How can we change?

We became storytellers as a way to get through the darkest days and forge ahead.

While today's crisis is much different, the most important thing we can all do at this time is to follow the guidelines that public officials are asking each of us to follow in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

It is also important that we understand the risks of isolation, including depression, as we cope with the new reality of what social distancing really means, and how it is changing our lives.

Even in this new normal, technology can help create virtual "groves" and "quilts" that can open the doors to simple acts of kindness, help tear down social barriers created through this virus, and through laughter and tears, bring light into someone's life.

A simple phone call or video chat can make a tremendous difference to someone we love. Make it a point to go through your contacts and reach out to someone every so often throughout the day. My joy in speaking to a former board member, who is alone in his apartment, brought us both comfort and hope.

You can also lend your support to a cause you care about while at home. Today, some of the same people who sewed together the Quilt panels 30 years ago to honor their loved ones, are once

again sewing, but this time they are making masks from quilt fabric for health workers to wear as they put their lives on the line to help others.

Others are engaging online to create a new movement to ensure our government and our political leaders use every resource — all means necessary — to save lives and help our nation and the world navigate through what will undoubtedly be a difficult journey ahead.

Just as we did through the AIDS crisis, we must come together as communities to comfort each other, to learn, to heal and to ensure that our actions today will improve the fabric of our society for this is our legacy.

We cannot repeat the mistakes of the past. We must learn and act now, as the health and safety of millions of people are at stake. Yes, there will be dark days. But from that grief and pain, there will always be hope.

John Cunningham is the executive director of the National AIDS Memorial. Located in San Francisco, its work, through the AIDS Memorial Grove, AIDS Memorial Quilt and inspiring programs, is to ensure that the lives of people who died from AIDS are not forgotten and that the story of AIDS is known by future generations.

To see fabric from the AIDS Memorial Quilt made into coronavirus masks, click here.

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