Ending the Epidemics #InTheirMemory

This year's U.S. Conference on AIDS honors those lost to HIV. How many of these faces do you recognize?

September 6, 2019 By Trent Straube

The theme of this year's United States Conference on AIDS (USCA), taking place now through September 8 in our nation's capital, is "Ending the Epidemics in Their Memory."

Writing on the USCA website, Paul Kawata, the executive director of NMAC, explains the relevance of the theme. (NMAC, formerly the National Minority AIDS Council, spearheads USCA.)

View this post on Instagram

#InTheirMemory Sunday was the anniversary of the passing of the Ryan White CARE Act. Without Ryan White #EndTheEpidemic wouldn't be a possibility today. His legacy continues to fund the fight against HIV today. #2019USCA

A post shared by NMAC (@n.m.a.c) on Aug 20, 2019 at 10:09am PDT

Below is an excerpt from his statement. Samples of NMAC Instagram posts with the related hashtag #InTheirMemory appear throughout this article, starting with the one above of teen activist Ryan White, who died in 1990.

“Our movement is about to come full circle as we build plans to end the HIV epidemic and hopefully the syndemics of hepatitis and [sexually transmitted infections, or STIs]. We stand on the shoulders of heroes who fought an unknown virus. The lessons learned during the plague years formed the foundation and strength of our work.

“It is impossible to fully describe the early years. Those unspeakable times became part of the DNA in our movement. We learned to fight back because nobody would take care of our friends. Food was regularly left outside of hospital rooms, funeral homes refused to cremate our partners and the list goes on. These harsh lessons taught us that the fight against the virus was also a fight for civil rights, equality and justice.

> “As we build plans to end the epidemic, USCA honors and remembers the leaders who made this moment possible. Leaders like Craig Harris, one of NMAC’s founders and our first board chair. In 1986 Craig jumped onto the stage of the American Public Health Association’s first plenary on AIDS because all of the speakers were white. He grabbed the microphone and said, ‘I will be heard.’ NMAC, like many HIV organizations, started as a protest to the unfair and unequal treatment of communities highly impacted by HIV. We lost Craig early in the epidemic, but his vision for racial justice is still core to NMAC and hopefully all of our work to end the epidemic.

“Who was your Craig Harris? Let’s remember the courage and strength of the heroes who are gone too soon. Their lives form the foundation for our work and commitment to justice, equality and civil rights.”

Speaking of #InTheirMemory, POZ blogger Joyce Mitchell, president of Capital City AIDS Fund, posted a loving tribute to a man lost to the epidemic who continues to inspire her today. For more, see “He Loved Me Unconditionally and Made Me Strong.”



View this post on Instagram

#InTheirMemory #2019USCA #EndTheEpidemic Marty Prairie was Oglala Lakota Sioux from the Pine Ridge Reservation, a descendant of Chief Big Foot of the Hunkpapa Nation. He was a long-term survivor of HIV/AIDS, which he first encountered among his friends in San Francisco during the early 1980's. Following his diagnosis he dedicated his life's work as an educator for the prevention of HIV/AIDS, STD's, TB , and Alcohol/Substance Abuse in minority communities, the homeless, and gay men of color. Marty was an early and guiding member of Asheville's Loving Food Resources, an HIV/AIDS food bank; C.L.O.S.E.R., a local Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender advocacy organization; and the Western North Carolina Community Health Services clinic (WNCCHS) where he also served on the board of directors. In partnership with Michael Harney, he co-founded and co-directed the Needle Exchange Program of Asheville (NEPA) which has served as a model for prevention of HIV transmission among injection drug users throughout North Carolina and beyond. He was an advisory member to the board of the North American Syringe Exchange Network (NASEN). On his own and as a representative of the National Native American AIDS Prevention Center (NNAAPC), he worked with many Native American tribes

including the Sioux, Navajo, Cherokee, and Catawba, alerting elders and educating youth in an effort to avert the development of an HIV/AIDS epidemic on the reservations and among all Native Americans.

Since 2001, NNAAPC has presented an annual award in his name at the United States Conference on AIDS, for outstanding work in HIV/AIDS prevention among Native peoples.

A post shared by NMAC (@n.m.a.c) on Aug 23, 2019 at 12:09pm PDT

And in related news, an iconic teenage AIDS activist who died in 1990 recently returned to the spotlight. For details, read "Ryan White State Marker Unveiled in Indiana [VIDEO]."

For more about this year's USCA, read Kawata's blog post "We Can End the HIV Epidemic by Working Together," see our special Q&A with him here and read about the conference kickoff here. On social media, look for the hashtags #2019USCA and #InTheirMemory. And if you're at the conference, stop by and visit POZ at booth 200.

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