



Focusing on Advocacy

The CEO and cofounder of Housing Works shares his lessons learned and his vision for the future.

September 25, 2023 By [Tim Murphy](#)

Charles King, 68, was diagnosed with HIV in 2000. He is the CEO and cofounder of New York City's [Housing Works](#), which launched in 1990 and has grown to serve more than 30,000 low-income or homeless New Yorkers, most living with or affected by HIV and AIDS. Below is an edited excerpt from an interview about his life and work that King gave to longtime POZ contributing writer Tim Murphy for his Substack newsletter, "[The Caftan Chronicles](#)," which features in-depth interviews with older gay men who've led, and continue to lead, remarkable lives.

Hi, Charles! First, describe where you live.

Since 2008, in a staff apartment in a 10-unit Housing Works residence in Harlem. I've lived in a Housing Works community since 1996—I love interacting with residents in a way that's not business-focused. I barbecue for everyone on holidays.

In 2018, you turned over your long-held title as Housing Works president to former COO Matthew Bernardo, although you remain CEO. What has that been like?

I'm no longer bogged down in the day-to-day. I can focus on international, federal, state and local advocacy, serving as the external face of Housing Works. I'm in heaven. I wake up every morning joyful to go to work.

What are the agency's current priorities?

In our health care program, the number of people living with HIV is now no more than a third. Overwhelmingly, we're seeing people who've experienced homelessness, incarceration and mental health and substance use disorders. We've also expanded into serving homeless people beyond those with HIV. Currently, we're operating four hotels for people leaving incarceration as well as a stabilization hotel for homeless people living on the street and a hotel for migrants. We'd like to offer an alternative to the congregate housing [NYC shelter system] model, which is dehumanizing.

A rally to unionize Housing Works employees [Instagram/@benkallos](https://www.instagram.com/benkallos)

You were born in 1955, correct?

In Delaware, the sixth of 10 children. When I was 2, my father, a preacher, moved us to Southern Texas. I was Wednesday's child, full of woe. From when I was 4, my father recognized that I was gay, so he tried to beat the devil out of me. Later, I put myself through Sam Houston State University, then went to Southwest Baptist Theological Seminary before going on in the 1980s to Yale Divinity School and then Yale Law.

How did you become involved with AIDS advocacy?

While in divinity school, I was drafted by the pastor of an all-Black church in New Haven to become assistant pastor. I'd sequestered my gay self, but [at a certain point], I told the pastor, "I'm going to resign, come out as a gay man and do something about AIDS." But he convinced me to stay through June to start an AIDS ministry, which I did, and in exchange, he gave me the pulpit one

Sunday to preach on AIDS—and to come out.

And did you?

I didn't say, "I'm gay." I said something like "For those of us who cannot fully be ourselves in the church..."

Let's get to the NYC part of your story.

After law school, I threw myself into [the AIDS activist group] ACT UP. At the time, there was very little city support for homeless people with HIV and AIDS, which I had decided was my calling, so we formed ACT UP's Housing Committee in 1988. That fall, a city court order had been won saying that homeless people with AIDS had to be moved out of city group shelters into private rooms in SROs [single-room occupancy low-budget hotels].

In summer 1989 in ACT UP, we formed Anger Into Direction Action, or AIDA, and I went to Majority Action, the committee of people of color in ACT UP, and we asked that ACT UP fund AIDA. This big, tall Black guy asked, "What's this white guy doing [here]?" That was Keith Cylar.

King (right) supporting U=U Jennifer Morton

And you and Keith ended up as both Housing Works cofounders and directors and as lovers until his death in 2004. How would you characterize that relationship?

Tumultuous. We were passionately in love. And meanwhile, I became conscious of his cocaine addiction. His use could be a point of conflict between us, but I was also proud that Housing Works had a CEO who openly acknowledged that he had a substance use disorder. For a while, we

stopped living together, but then we moved back in. By our last final years together, we were amazingly compatible and more deeply in love than ever.

Keith had been HIV positive?

Yes, but he didn't transmit it to me—another sex partner did. I had not told anyone about my status since my 2000 diagnosis because here I was, the head of an AIDS organization, and how could I get HIV knowing all I knew? But after Keith died, I felt it was important that the staff know. So I started with a dinner with the HIV-positive staff and told them. And that created wild emotions, including people being angry at me.

Why?

They expected better of me. But in subsequent disclosures to staff, I was met with warm embraces and support. Again, I felt it was important to be open about it. I wanted to let people know that Housing Works was still being led by someone who had HIV.

A few years ago, when some staffers were pushing for unionization, you got a very public media rap for appearing to oppose it, partly because you refused to sign an agreement that would bar Housing Works from interfering in union organizing.

I've always supported unions, but I wasn't going to give RWDSU [the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, which the staff voted to join] carte blanche. I thought they needed to earn staff votes. So there was an election and unionization won. And now, we have a very good relationship with the union.

How you were portrayed during the union fight ties a bit into my next question: What's been your self-image in the past several years of heightened discourse around white male privilege?

I've lived most of my life very conscious of my whiteness. The first time I was consumed with guilt as a child was realizing that I had used my whiteness in a way that hurt a group of Mexicans. I was 8 or 9. My father would rent out his sons as a team to pick cotton. We were the only white team, and we'd work with crews brought over from Mexico. You were paid by the pound, and often, we would put clods in our sacks to make them heavier. So I did that, and once, out fell the clods. The foreman asked, "What the fuck is this?" I clammed up, and it was blamed on the Mexicans, and next thing you know, immigration shows up and departs the whole crew back to Mexico. And I have lived pained by that to this day.

What does that story mean in the context of Housing Works?

There's a reason why a third of our board is not chosen by me. [They are Housing Works clients.] We've worked hard to maintain diverse leadership. There is very little of just me saying, "This is what we're going to do." I always think about things in terms of helping the people we serve. Like the new Housing Works cannabis dispensary. We're going to make good money off it, but I wanted to open it to [help] people who've been harmed by cannabis and other drug criminalization. So all

our profits from cannabis are going to be used to help people who've been criminalized related to drugs. We're emphasizing hiring people who've been harmed by drug laws.

King's Housing Works residence

Courtesy of Housing Works

What do you want the rest of your life to be about?

If I could be a part of eliminating the congregate NYC shelter system, that would give me great fulfillment. My other goal is to continue engaging individuals to help them transform their lives. I can think of no greater reward than watching people come into the fullest version of who they can be.

This article was excerpted with permission from [The Caftan Chronicles](#) by Tim Murphy.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

<http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/focusing-advocacy>