Health and Human Rights

The new executive director of MPact shares his vision for the future of the global organization.

June 28, 2021 By By Gregory Tartaglione

Andrew Spieldenner, PhD, became the new executive director of MPact Global Action for Gay Men's Health and Rights on March 1, 2021. Gregory Tartaglione, senior communications officer at MPact, interviewed Spieldenner to learn more about him and to pick his brain about his vision for the future of MPact. Below is an edited version.

Hi, Andy, how's it going? How's quarantine been treating you this last year?

Is that even a question? Obviously, this last year has been incredibly hard. Like everyone else, it's given me a lot of time to think about what's really important to me, and that's a big part of what led me to MPact.

I think that one of the lessons we've learned during COVID is how vulnerable LGBT people still are around the world. Government leaders and policymakers have been quick to turn on us during this pandemic, and gay men globally need a voice that can speak on behalf of our health needs and our human rights.

Absolutely! Can you tell us a little bit about your upbringing and how you first got interested in advocacy work?

Sure. I grew up all over the United States. My mom's family were all refugees of the Vietnam War, and I remember at one point we had as many as 25 people living in our house. I've witnessed a huge shift in the sentiment about refugee communities since that time. Once, at a gay bar in Berlin, I saw this sign that said, "Nobody ever leaves without a reason," and that really resonated with me, both as a child of immigrants and as a queer person. Many of us queer people have migrated in search of finding a safe place to come out and to be ourselves, and I think MPact has a big role to play in advocating for those people who don't have access to legislators, to resources and to protection around the world.

What was your introduction to Mpact?

George [Ayala, MPact's founding executive director] and I have been friends for close to 30 years, so I remember when he started this organization, and I've gotten to meet other MPact staff over the years at various conferences.

Back in 2012, I was asked to be part of a panel at MPact's pre-meeting at the International AIDS Conference in DC. I remember one of the panelists didn't show up, and we found out it was because he had been murdered in his country the week before. It was an incredibly sobering experience.

Here we were, gathered to talk about HIV, but that news was a terrible reminder of all the many ways in which our communities are still not protected. HIV is a huge issue, of course, but in many parts of the world, including the United States, we can still be killed just for being ourselves.

What's the biggest issue facing gay and bisexual men these days?

Sexual health. I think COVID especially has disrupted our ability to talk about sex. There is already a lot of shame in the gay community when people are open and honest about their sex life, and now you add COVID on top of that. It's the same stigma that prevents people from being comfortable talking to their doctors and getting the health care we need.

COVID has also isolated us from our communities. Even with all these virtual gatherings, if you're not out to the people you live with, how are you supposed to participate? I think there's going to be a lot of work to repair the damage from this year of isolation, and we're going to have to come up with new, healthier ways to support gay and bisexual men to connect.

For sure! What's one thing you would change about the gay community?

I wish we still embraced sex as a revolutionary act. Queerness to me has always been about pushing the norms and being disruptive. A lot of the big cis gay institutions focus only on helping queer people try to fit in, proving that they're not so different from straight people. But what about the rest of us who don't fit in?

The fact of the matter is that our sexuality and our identities are not the norm in much of the world. That's why there are still policies and people that are firmly against us. I want to dream of what kind of society and community we can build beyond that.

Same question but about the field of sexual health: What do you wish were different?

As somebody living with HIV, I find it sad when HIV is removed from the conversation. We can't talk about gay men without talking about gay men who are living with HIV, or gay men who use drugs, or gay men who engage in sex work, or gay trans men and nonbinary people. We need more spaces where we can articulate the needs of these parts of our community.

What are some of the organizations doing this kind of work right now?

I really respect organizations like the Positive Women's Network–USA, the Black AIDS Institute and The Counter Narrative Project that are shifting the narratives about HIV and racial justice. They are extraordinary leaders in bringing resources to the communities who need them most.

Also one of the reasons I was really excited to join MPact was to get to work with the global key population networks—INPUD, NSWP, ICW, GNP+, GATE—that are doing amazing advocacy to advance the human rights focus of the global HIV response.

Who do you think are the people who need MPact most, and what can we do for them?

The people who need us most are the ones who probably don't know we exist. I remember I was in Haiti with my best friend, and we were going to visit his family, and our bus broke down in the middle of nowhere. Within the hour, a small group of people came to sell us food and keep us entertained, and the person running the whole show and telling everyone what to do was this amazing young gender-nonconforming queer person.

That's the kind of community leader who needs our support. That person should know who MPact is and be able to find our resources easily to make their dreams for their community a reality.

What can we expect from MPact in the next year?

One of the lessons we've learned is how much can be done remotely and online. I'm interested in exploring how we can continue to push our work into the digital space, whether that be refining the way we use our social media platforms or hosting digital trainings for service providers and people in our community.

Even with our advocacy—now that all of these high-level meetings are happening online—we have to come up with new strategies to reclaim our space at these virtual tables. It gives us a unique opportunity to rethink the way we collaborate with other global networks and all of our partners around the world as well, which I think is really exciting.

What's something people probably don't know about you?

I'm a total comics geek. I go to San Diego Comic-Con every year. Comic books were how I first learned how to read, and as a young queer kid, I was obviously drawn to the tightly clad superhero men and the fierce superhero divas.

Comics were a place where a queer kid could escape and be safe and where being different was something to be celebrated and not hidden. Except behind a mask, I guess. But we've all gotten used to wearing masks this last year.

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