



HIV as the Common Denominator

Public health warrior Jirair Ratevosian continues to fight for people living with the virus.

May 13, 2024 By [Tim Murphy](#)

On a late morning in mid-February, Jirair Ratevosian was chatting on the phone with POZ from an apartment in Burbank, California, that he'd rented so that he could run for the U.S. congressional seat to be vacated by Representative Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), who has represented this deep-blue district since 2001.

It's the district that Ratevosian, 43, the son of an Armenian father and a Lebanese mother, was born in. There are roughly 200,000 Armenians in LA County, the largest such population outside of Armenia.

When asked whether he'd reached out to LA's most famous Armenian for support, Ratevosian, who is gay and already has the bulleted-talking-points conversational style of a seasoned politician, retorts, "Do you mean the Kardashians or Cher? We're actively reaching out to both."

His campaign was also reaching out to celebrities who have been instrumental in fighting HIV and AIDS, including Sheryl Lee Ralph and Alicia Keys. This is because Ratevosian, who is HIV negative, has made ending HIV and AIDS his mission—a career trajectory he aimed to take straight to the Capitol.

"I want to be the AIDS activist in Congress," Ratevosian says. He wants to assume the lead HIV and AIDS advocacy role played for the past quarter of a century by Representative Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), who was vacating her seat to run against Schiff in the Democratic primary for the Senate. Ratevosian worked in Lee's office for three and a half years and calls her "the boss of the HIV movement."

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AIDS.**

But Ratevosian, who has an MPH from Boston University and a DrPH from Johns Hopkins University, was facing a crowded field of 15 candidates—and he wasn't even the only LGBTQ candidate or the only Armenian candidate vying for the seat. With his relatively low profile—compared with, say, fellow contender Laura Friedman, already well established in the district, having held previous elected positions—why did he think he had a chance?

“Because I haven't been afraid to stand alone and fight,” he answers. “That's been my life's work, even when it's not popular.” He claims that he was the only candidate in his race to call for a cease-fire in Gaza. He says not everyone in LA's Armenian community was happy about his being an openly gay Armenian. “My Twitter and Instagram are full of hate,” he says. “People saying I shouldn't be both gay and Armenian—that I should pick one.”

Further to why he felt he had a fighting chance, he says, “I'm the only one in the race with such deep roots in LA.” Other strong points, he says, were “my lived experience as a gay man and the son of Armenians who embody the American dream.”

Ratevosian was born in Hollywood in 1980 but grew up attending Armenian Christian private schools in Sun Valley, just outside LA. “I was a teacher's pet but also someone who was expelled from first grade because once at recess I opened the gates and all the kids ran out,” he says. “Maybe I was a Che Guevara in the making.”

Despite that early infraction, he went on to become a straight-A student. “I wanted to be a doctor,” he says, adding that it was one of the preferred professions in LA's ambitious Armenian community. He was also a political junkie. “I loved reading the news and watching President Reagan”—beloved by his Republican family—“when he would speak on TV.”

In high school, where he was class president, he says he had no gay desires or even the idea that he was gay. “I went to prom and was madly in love with this one girl,” he says. But he does remember the moment in 1991 when LA Lakers superstar Magic Johnson announced that he had HIV. “My father was a big Magic fan and was very distraught over the news.”

Ratevosian studied physiology and political science at the University of California, Los Angeles, and graduated in 2003, after which he started a medical postbaccalaureate at the University of California, San Francisco. While there, he won a scholarship from National Geographic to practice photography in South Africa.

“I was there to take photos of nature,” he recalls, but one day he visited an HIV clinic run by Doctors Without Borders. “That’s the moment I credit with changing my life,” he says, “because I was so offended to learn that there was lifesaving HIV treatment available in the United States but not in South Africa.” The U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to fight the virus in poor nations had only just launched.

Ratevosian decided to go into public health “to have a larger impact on people’s lives than being a physician,” he says. “It’s that restless gene I have.” He went to public health graduate school at Boston University, which included spending eight weeks in Kenya in 2005 to finish his practicum. After he graduated, he served on Boston’s Ryan White HIV Planning Commission for a year.

“That’s when I first learned about a lot of the inequities in terms of how resources are sent to cities,” he says. People living with HIV and their advocates would regularly attend the meetings to talk about their needs. “It was the first time I was seeing the power of HIV advocacy.”

But even in Boston, miles from home, his gayness remained latent. “I remember watching Angels in America and wondering if I was suppressing something,” he says. Nonetheless, by this point, he was completely devoted to HIV work and had moved to Washington, DC, where he worked for Physicians for Human Rights, before becoming deputy director of public policy for amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research, where he worked on syringe access programs.

He also volunteered at a DC needle exchange as well as at the Whitman-Walker LGBTQ health clinic, for which he did HIV testing at the Crew Club, the local gay bathhouse. “I saw tons of people, most of them young and Black, who’d find out they were HIV positive and start sobbing in despair and hopelessness,” he recalls. “We didn’t know about U=U at the time,” he adds, referring to the Undetectable Equals Untransmittable message, which means that people living with HIV who are on treatment and have an undetectable viral load do not transmit HIV through sex.

At this time, Ratevosian says, “I had tons of gay friends and was part of the HIV community,” but still “no one knew I was gay.” Afraid that his family and the Armenian community back home would reject him, he was keeping himself closeted.

In 2011, Ratevosian started working as Lee’s legislative director. “She was the idol of the HIV policy community, the only one who was hearing us,” he says of the congresswoman. He said his “crowning moment” during his three-and-a-half-year tenure in her office was serving as lead staffer on the reauthorization of PEPFAR.

Working for Lee, Ratevosian says, “I learned that you could be progressive and stay true to your core values but also work with people who don’t agree with you to get things done.” He also learned “how lobbyists and other special interests with money can influence members of Congress.”

Ratevosian left Lee’s office in 2014 to become the director of government affairs for Gilead Sciences, the HIV pharmaceutical giant, where, he says, “I saw myself as an insider who was helping my community advance things related to the HIV response.” After two years, the company relocated him from DC to San Francisco, where his participation in the AIDS/LifeCycle fundraising event sparked him to finally come out to family and friends.

His friends were fine with it—“we did shots to celebrate,” he recalls—but his parents were a mixed bag. “My dad hugged me and said that he and my mom were proud of me, but my mom cried and said, ‘We shouldn’t have let you go to Boston. We want you to be married and have kids.’ I told her that I could do all those things. They didn’t know it was possible to be gay and happy.”

His big public coming-out occurred in 2023 when The New York Times ran a story on his wedding to Micheal Osa Ighodaro, a Nigerian LGBTQ and HIV-positive activist who was granted asylum in the United States in 2013. Ighodaro currently works for the Prevention Access Campaign, which promotes the U=U message, and is also cofounder and executive director of the group Global Black Gay Men Connect.

The couple met in 2019 at a Brooklyn party thrown by mutual friends. After that, they would grab drinks together at various HIV-related conferences. Then, in 2020, Ratevosian invited Ighodaro to canvass for Joe Biden with him in Iowa, which is when their romantic relationship began.

“He’s the kindest person I know,” Ighodaro says of Ratevosian. “He has a very big heart and a sense of humility and is very funny but is also very pragmatic.” The two have shared each other’s cultures. Indeed, Ighodaro has learned about Armenian and Lebanese food, including the honey-drenched phyllo dessert baklava, and has cooked Nigerian staples like jollof rice for Ratevosian’s family.

Plus, says Ratevosian, his parents love Ighodaro, which has helped them accept their son’s gayness. “Micheal had an even more difficult experience than I did coming out to his family,” he says. And Ighodaro adds, “I’m far from my family, but Jirair’s family is definitely my family now.”

When POZ spoke with Ratevosian, Ighodaro had finally traveled west to live in Burbank with him and their fluffy white dog, Jozi Ruth, to help him on the campaign. In addition to catching movies together and hanging out in the West Hollywood gay bars, the couple has dinner weekly with Ratevosian's parents. "My parents love Micheal so much and sensed he needed that extra TLC," says Ratevosian.

In early March, seasoned lawmaker Laura Friedman won the primary for the 30th Congressional District with 30% of the total vote—well ahead of any other candidate, including Ratevosian, who came in ninth out of 15 candidates, with 1.9% of the vote.

Talking with POZ a few days later, Ratevosian says, "I'm feeling disappointed but proud." Whereas some of his rivals had over \$1 million in campaign funds, he had about \$350,000, which he says was an impressive sum "for a first-time candidate not backed by special interests or PACs. Nobody was pushing me to run except for the HIV and public health communities, and we all know," he says with a laugh, "that those groups don't have money."

He sent a thank-you email to his supporters that read, in part: "Although we don't see a path to victory with the votes currently counted, I could not be prouder of how we ran this campaign. From being the first candidate to call for a cease-fire [in Gaza] to standing up for the rights of all LGBTQ people, I'm proud of the values that this campaign stuck to even when the going got tough."

He also lamented that Adam Schiff—the very person whose congressional seat Ratevosian had been vying for—had beat Barbara Lee in the Senate primary race.

In other words, he says, there would soon no longer be even one longtime hardcore champion of HIV issues in Congress—at a time when right-wing Republicans are breaking with decades of bipartisan support for such issues, with some questioning ongoing funding for PEPFAR and domestic HIV efforts, like the Ending the Epidemic initiative.

"No one goes to Congress anymore wanting to fight AIDS," he says. While on the campaign trail, Ratevosian found it alarming to learn how many citizens lacked faith in government—and even more alarming that many young people lacked the faith to vote.

Meanwhile, he adds, offers for his next chapter were arriving, but he wanted to use some of the time without a job to reflect. "This campaign was in pursuit of an opportunity to continue the work I've always done for health justice, but it didn't work out. So I'll take time to think about where else my experience, energy and passion can be transferred to."

Ratevosian says that he will continue his HIV work. He is looking to do a postdoctoral fellowship at Yale University focused on breaking barriers to pre-exposure prophylaxis access for Black and Latino gay and bisexual men. “When I was working for Representative Lee,” he says, “even when we were working on U.S. policy in Afghanistan, we were working the same day on Ryan White funding. HIV has been the common denominator for me all along.”

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