Honoring Heroes in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS

The 26th Annual Steve Chase Humanitarian Awards were held in Palm Springs, California.

February 10, 2020 By Jennifer Morton

Hollywood may buzz about the Oscars for the next few days, but right now, I'm buzzing about the three awards handed out Saturday, February 8, in Palm Springs, California, at the 26th Annual Steve Chase Humanitarian Awards. The event raised funds for the Desert AIDS Project (DAP), which provides primary medical care, HIV and hepatitis specialty care, dentistry, behavioral health and social services to more than 7,000 Coachella Valley residents. This year, Hank Plante, Garry Kief and Ambassador Deborah L. Birx, MD, were honored for their work in combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Ambassador Birx received the Science & Medicine Award for her efforts in fighting HIV/AIDS around the globe. Birx is a world-renowned medical expert and has spent the last 30 years focused on HIV immunology, vaccine research and global health. She is currently the coordinator of the United States Government Activities to Combat HIV/AIDS and U.S. Special Representative for Global Health Diplomacy. She also oversees the implementation of the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) as well as all U.S. government engagement with The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Her work addresses global health challenges and accelerates progress toward achieving an AIDS-free generation, ending preventable child and maternal deaths, and preventing, detecting and responding to infectious disease threats.

Ambassador Deborah L Birx, MDLani Garfield

It’s no wonder that DAP’s CEO, David Brinkman, described Ambassador Birx as “the most important person on the planet currently in the fight to end HIV.”

Desert AIDS Project CEO David BrinkmanLani Garfield

Former DAP board member Garry Kief (and husband of Barry Manilow) was honored with the Partners for Life Award. Kief currently serves on several boards in the Palm Springs area and has raised money on behalf of the national fraternity Sigma Phi Epsilon for programs and scholarships to support undergraduate men. Kief is president/CEO of Stiletto Entertainment Group and president of Barry Manilow Productions. He also oversees the Manilow Music Project, which empowers underfunded school music programs to provide quality music education.

Garry KiefLani Garfield

While accepting the award, Kief spoke passionately about why he supports the work of DAP:

“It doesn’t matter if you are a Democrat or a Republican. It doesn’t matter if you are a Catholic or a Jew, Black or white, what matters is your heart. And your hearts tell you that together our little village can help cure AIDS, we can prevent AIDS and we can make life better for those who are living with AIDS. That’s not a political issue—that’s a people issue—and our little village takes care of our people.”

Hank PlanteLani Garfield

Next, television reporter and newspaper columnist Hank Plante received the Arts & Activism Award. Plante was one of the first openly gay TV reporters in the United States and spent 25 years at KPIX-TV in San Francisco, where he covered the emergence of the AIDS epidemic. He was featured in the documentary film 5B, which was honored at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival and won a 2019 POZ Award for Best Film. Plante has won several local and national Emmys as well as the prestigious George Foster Peabody Award, in 1986 for his reporting on the AIDS crisis. Here's a clip showcasing his work:

Emmy- and Tony Award–winning actress and singer Kristin Chenoweth capped off the evening with a heart-warming performance including a cover of Dolly Parton's hit, "I Will Always Love You." During her set, she addressed the AIDS epidemic and thanked all the medical doctors for all they've done. She said, "I think how far we've come. I'm so proud of that. And soon we will eradicate it, right?"



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In her acceptance speech for Best Actress at the Academy Awards, Reneé Zellweger spoke about having heroes that we can all agree on. The heroes honored at the Steve Chase Awards are the kind of heroes we need more of. They are the men and women who have led us through the fight and continue to inspire us each day. They are the reason we will eradicate HIV.

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