



The Long Game

Activism in the streets directly shapes public opinion and public policy, according to HIV activist Axel Torres Marrero.

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Axel Torres Marrero is one of the most influential HIV activists in New Jersey. As the senior director of policy, prevention and harm reduction at Hyacinth, the largest AIDS service organization in the state, his fingerprints are on nearly every HIV-related law in New Jersey.

His recent legislative victories include expanded needle exchange access in New Jersey. Marrero, who is HIV negative, was also the principal lobbyist for New Jersey's effort to decriminalize HIV transmission, upending a law that criminalized the sex lives of people with the virus.

Marrero, a native Puerto Rican who now splits his time between Jersey City and Florida, embraced activism early.

"Early on, I saw commonalities between ethnicity and people who are LGBTQ, people who tended to be marginalized," he says. "And I saw what that means in terms of the political structure, where you have no power and very little ability to change things."

Axel Torres MarreroTamara Fleming

That compelled him to protest government policies that disproportionately harmed Black and brown people. He quickly noticed the deadly intersection of AIDS and drug use, which he labels a

“twin epidemic.”

“I came to AIDS activism by way of addiction first,” he says. “There are a lot of individuals who have forgotten what it was like when the twin epidemics, HIV and crack, hit Latin American and African-American communities in the New York area, including Jersey City and Newark. And when they hit, I had a front seat to the devastation.”

That’s when Marrero discovered ACT UP, which brought much-needed attention to the AIDS crisis.

The biggest hurdle he encountered in the fight against HIV was stigma. “A code of silence fell over communities of color,” Marrero says. “They didn’t want to speak about it.”

He describes a stigma so corrosive it drove grieving families to conceal the actual cause of an AIDS death.

“Even as a young person, I knew there was no reason for that to happen,” Marrero says. “I understood that the government doesn’t care because we’re talking about either a person of color or another marginalized group.”

He notes that sex workers, people who inject drugs, immigrants and LGBTQ people were especially harmed by government inaction.

“It felt like the entire system was saying, ‘Because you are less-than, your community deserves the twin epidemics of addiction and HIV.’ So it didn’t take much for me to get involved with ACT UP,” Marrero adds.

That’s when he learned that activism in the streets directly shapes public opinion and public policy.

“If it wasn’t for ACT UP doing the fight on the front lines, the backroom deals would never have happened,” he says. “I just happened to have been mentored by someone who did both.” And that’s how Marrero became one of the most influential HIV lobbyists in the business.

His time with ACT UP also helped him hone the skills and patience to play the long game, especially regarding unpopular solutions to combat HIV transmission, like expanding syringe

access.

“Feelings often trumped our facts,” Marrero says about his efforts. “Those lessons that I learned early on, I apply to every policy challenge I’ve had. When feelings trump facts—and they often do—that doesn’t shock me. Work a different chessboard when that happens.”

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