Passing the Torch

April 1, 2009 By David Evans

People with HIV lost one of their greatest champions when Martin Delaney died of liver cancer January 23, 2009. He was 63. Though not HIV positive himself, he kept up the pressure on scientists, politicians and other activists to continue talking about a cure, even when such talk became unpopular.

I had the honor to call Marty my friend. He was a brilliant thinker, educator and, above all, a negotiator. For 27 years, he shared those gifts on behalf of people with HIV. He was also a complex and imperfect man—just like the rest of us—and like any good activist, he managed to ruffle some feathers along the way.
Marty was a guiding force in research on the immune system and therapeutic vaccines. He also played a key role in HIV drug development, particularly of protease inhibitors. While publicly advocating that pharmaceutical companies continue to invest in HIV research, he led the Fair Pricing Coalition to lower or freeze the prices of existing HIV drugs. His skill and experience as a negotiator with big business allowed him to effectively advocate for HIV-positive people with the heads of industry and government.

Marty also worked tirelessly to give people with HIV the information and resources they needed to be proactive about their health care. He founded Project Inform in San Francisco, one of the country's first nonprofits devoted to HIV treatment advocacy. I had the privilege of working with Marty to set up informational town meetings across the nation.

Marty also counseled hundreds of people individually who called at all hours seeking his advice. He used his knowledge and influence to help people access experimental drugs and advocate for better treatment from their health care providers, who were often inexperienced in treating HIV. People would come up to Marty after a town meeting to talk with him in person for the first time and tell him that he'd literally saved their lives.

With the world economy in shambles, HIV treatment and research will likely suffer. When things seemed darkest, however, Marty always fought the hardest. I hope that Marty's spirit and example will give those of us he's left behind the courage to fight the difficult battles ahead. It's the least we can do.

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