Mi Gente (My People)

September 25, 2017 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

I am not Puerto Rican, but I feel a kinship with the island's people and culture. Being a native New Yorker and a first-generation Cuban American, my affection for Puerto Rico shouldn't be a surprise, but for some people it is.

It's true that there is a rivalry between Puerto Rico and Cuba, but for me, it's a friendly one. The stories of the two islands are so intertwined that I find it silly that the rivalry should be anything but friendly. Not only do the islands share a language, but they also share a history of U.S. intervention.

The islands also share a flag—sort of. The designs are the same, but the Puerto Rican flag has a blue triangle with red stripes, and the Cuban flag has a red triangle with blue stripes. The Puerto Rican flag was modeled after the Cuban flag and adopted by Puerto Rican exiles of the Cuban Revolutionary Committee in solidarity in 1895 to rally support for both islands' liberation from Spain.

The United States intervened to make that happen, but Cuba eventually became independent while Puerto Rico remained under U.S. control. That dependence on the United States conferred U.S. citizenship, but it has also kept the fate of the people in the hands of the U.S. federal government, for better or worse—and many would argue for worse.

In 2008, POZ took an in-depth look into the state of AIDS in Puerto Rico. Back then, there were many problems with rationing HIV medications and the quality of care was not very good, to say the least. Fortunately, many of those problems have been resolved.

However, the current situation for Puerto Ricans living with HIV on the island is yet again dire. A complex series of events over the past decade in Puerto Rico has led to a financial crisis, which has the potential to derail all the progress that has been made by and for Puerto Ricans living with HIV.

Activists such as our cover gal, L'Orangelis Thomas Negrón, are fighting to protect that progress. Born with HIV, she has experienced the improvements that have been made and the hardships that those with the virus now face. Click here to read how L'Orangelis and others are addressing the threat from the financial crisis.

Protecting progress for people living with HIV on the U.S. mainland has also proved to be challenging. Republican efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act have been first among a long list

of threats. Thankfully, many HIV advocates work every day on our behalf on several fronts.

David Ernesto Munar is certainly one of them. He has been the president and CEO of Howard Brown Health in Chicago since 2014. Previously, for more than two decades, he held several positions at the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, including president and CEO. He has been living with HIV since 1994. Click here to read our Q&A with David.

Another HIV advocate on the front lines of the epidemic is Julio Fonseca. He is currently the program manager for AIDS United's Positive Organizing Project, which gives grants to groups that engage HIV-positive people in advocacy. As someone living with the virus, Julio brings his personal experience to his professional role. Click here to read more.

Efforts to not only protect but also advance progress globally against HIV/AIDS are bearing fruit. Click here for an update on the audacious "90-90-90" goals set by UNAIDS.

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