Remembering Dennis deLeon

December 14, 2009 By Sean Strub

AIDS activist Dennis deLeon

Dennis deLeon, longtime AIDS activist and president of the Latino Commission on AIDS, died December 14, 2009. His passing is a huge loss for the AIDS and civil liberties movements. It also is a milestone, as he was one of the dwindling few activists from the early years of the epidemic still fighting it full-time.

Since testing positive in 1986, Dennis was an outspoken, effective and tenacious advocate for people with HIV, especially in the Latino community. In New York City and across the nation, he advocated for Latino inclusion and pushed strategies to address the disproportionate rate of HIV in the Latino community.

From 1990 to 1996, he was cochair and then chair of the board of directors of Housing Works, now one of the largest AIDS service providers in the nation. Charles King, the cofounder and president of Housing Works, said in a statement: “Housing Works will always be in his debt for the leadership he provided in our early years, when we never had enough money but always believed we could do anything we dreamed.”

Beyond his AIDS activism, Dennis and his longtime partner, Bruce Kiernan, were role models, mentors and confidants for a wide circle of friends, myself included. I met Dennis and Bruce before the epidemic hit, more than 30 years ago, when they lived in Washington, DC, and I was a student there at Georgetown University.

Shortly after I came out of the closet, I was exceptionally lucky to have been taken to a party at their house and met them. Dennis was one of the most handsome men I had ever met. For three decades, he and Bruce remained an example to me of what love, commitment and partnership could be like.

Dennis and I often disagreed about controversies in the epidemic. He was never shy about letting me know where, in his opinion, our coverage in *POZ* fell short or was off the mark. He was one of my favorite debating partners, because he was so smart, always presented the best and clearest arguments for his position and never made it personal. I adored him and learned much from him.

Dennis was a 1974 graduate of Stanford Law School. He later was a trial attorney for the Department of Justice. His New York career began at the Office of the Corporation Counsel for the City of New York, where he focused on civil rights cases and supervised police misconduct actions.

In 1986, he was appointed director of the Mayor’s Commission on Latino Concerns, and in 1988 he

became deputy Manhattan borough president. In 1990, Mayor David Dinkins appointed Dennis chair of the New York City Commission on Human Rights. From September 1994 until his death, he was president of the Latino Commission on AIDS.

He made a tremendous difference in the lives of many, many people. In 1998 and 1999, after Dennis regained his health through combination therapy, he wrote several first-person essays for *POZ*. In re-reading them, it makes me wish we had urged him to write for *POZ* more often. These columns give a touching insight into this exceptional man who cared and accomplished so much.

In "Life After Legacy" he writes, almost with embarrassment, about his desire to leave a legacy that will have meaning to his community and family. He describes how he learned, over time, that the most important legacy is found in the lives one touches rather than in how often one is quoted in the media.

Despite the career concerns he expressed in this column—concerns shared by many whose health was restored by combination therapy, mine included—Dennis continued in his AIDS work, reaching ever greater accomplishments and influence, including the creation of the first Latino AIDS Action Agenda, which was released two years ago.

Dennis touched innumerable lives. His legacy is one that will continue to impact people and to which every activist ought to aspire. My thoughts and prayers are with Bruce and their family.

First-person essays by Dennis deLeon in POZ:

May 1998 - "Life: Good Pill Hunting"

July 1998 - "In the Blood"

March 1999 - "Life After Legacy"

The vigil and viewing will take place in New York City at Reddens Funeral Home at 325 West 14th Street, between 8th Avenue and 9th Avenue, on Wednesday, December 16, from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m.

The funeral service will take place in New York City at the Parish of St. Joseph in Greenwich Village, located at 371 Avenue of the Americas, between Washington Place and Waverly Place, on Thursday, December 17, starting at 10 a.m.

In response to requests, the Latino Commission on AIDS and the friends and family of Dennis deLeon have created the "Dennis deLeon Memorial Fund" for the enhancement of HIV/AIDS treatment education.

If you would like to donate to the Fund, please send all contributions to:
Latino Commission on AIDS
24 West 25th Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10010
Attn: "Dennis deLeon Memorial Fund"

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