Strong Enough

Our June cover story links past AIDS activism to current efforts to prevent gun violence.

May 14, 2018 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

I will always remember how horrible I felt in June 2016 when I heard the news about the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. The gunman had killed 49 people and wounded over 50 others. Most of the people he killed were LGBT Latinos.

At the time, the incident was the deadliest mass shooting by a single gunman in U.S. history. That it happened during Pride Month made the pain for all LGBT people even worse. As a gay Latino, however, I felt an especially strong connection to Pulse. I felt like it could have been me.

To commemorate the one-year anniversary of Pulse, I had the honor of interviewing Ricardo J. Negron-Almodovar. After surviving the shooting, he went on to become the director of Proyecto Somos Orlando (Project We Are Orlando), which provides long-term support and services to people affected by the Pulse shooting.

Ricardo shared how challenging life had been for all of them in the wake of the shooting. He said that many people in his program had been engaging in behaviors that put them at risk of HIV in terms of substance use and sex to cope with their feelings.

Pulse had forever made gun violence a concern for LGBT people, and the aftermath of the shooting had also connected HIV to the issue. But the intersectionality didn't stop there. Actually, it grew. A number of AIDS activists in New York City were so fired up by Pulse that they created a grassroots group called Gays Against Guns (GAG).

In fact, one of GAG's founders is Tim Murphy, a POZ contributing writer. However, as he has pointed out, he is just one of the many AIDS activists energizing the group, which has increased its actions in coordination with other groups in the wake of the Parkland, Florida, shooting.

When I asked Tim to suggest a GAG member to tell our readers how the group is linked to AIDS activism, he immediately named long-term HIV survivor Jay W. Walker. Jay is a founding member of and organizer for GAG. He graces the cover of this LGBT-themed issue because he helps link past AIDS activism to current efforts to prevent gun violence. Click here to read his essay.

The role of lesbians in the HIV epidemic is often overlooked. Not only were lesbians a major force in the early days of the AIDS crisis, tending to dying gay men and hitting the streets to protest in

solidarity, but they also were among those living with the virus from the beginning. Someone who knows that history well is AIDS historian Sarah Schulman. Click here to read about her latest work.

Fighting for our rights as people living with HIV has always been a struggle, regardless of who sits in the White House. However, the hurdles we face under the Trump administration—from attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act to proposals to cut major funding to most HIV programs—are especially daunting.

For an update on current federal advocacy, click here for a recap of AIDSWatch 2018, the 25th anniversary of this lobbying effort.

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