The Point of It All

In an opinion piece titled "The Point of It All: Remembering Ken Watson," writer, community organizer and long-term survivor Craig Washington wonders how best to remember friends lost to AIDS. Below is an edited excerpt.

January 8, 2018 By Craig Washington

I met Ken soon after I started volunteering at AID Atlanta in 1992. He was a member of the AIDS 101 committee and a bona fide star volunteer. A natural-born cheerleader, Ken made everyone on his team want to do their best. His commitment to educating people about AIDS was unshakable, as was his faith. He had lost many to what he called "those four deadly girls—Aida, Ida, Dedra and Sandra."

In spite of bouts with opportunistic infections from which he would bounce back, Ken was always making time to visit an ailing friend at home or in a hospital bed. A native of Houston, Ken graduated from Texas Southern University—the first in his family to earn a college degree. Neither his sexual orientation nor his health was hidden from his mother and his sisters.

"He would take me with him to see friends in the last stages of AIDS," says Keith Kennard, one of Ken's closest friends. "I didn't like it because I thought, There goes me one day." Despite his anxieties, Keith would accompany Ken and learn to appreciate the care he provided.

Ken taught me by just being himself. I was a transplant from Queens, New York, who did not appreciate the slower pace or the time people took to talk to one another in the South. From his AIDS 101 table, Ken would gracefully greet seminar attendees bearing questionable cure theories. "People would come up to him so scared, and he would put them at ease," Keith recalled.

The first years following the development of multidrug combination therapies were uneasy. Yet many who had fallen off the social scene were climbing out from the shadows. The local seminar Operation Survive was renamed THRIVE Weekend because more and more of us were returning to robust health.

In those changing times, I dared imagine that older men in groups like Brothers Back 2 Back and Men of Color in Motion might live to tell in the new millennium. Most of them would not. I let myself hope that Ken would put meat back on those pretty calves of his. But the cocktail came too late for him. Ken died in 1997.

I wonder what Ken would have thought about THRIVE SS, an advocacy organization for HIV-

positive Black gay men whose founders were frustrated by the limitations of local AIDS services. The group's frequent social activities and online chats weave durable bonds between members. They regard each other as brothers to whom they feel fully responsible. I believe that in THRIVE SS, Ken would have recognized the torch passed on from his generation to the next.

We acknowledge the feats of lofty figures and their abilities to clear the highest hurdles. In singling out our celebrities, we often overlook the collective power of the communities that sustained them. Being a 57-year-old HIV-positive Black gay man, I cite the sidelined histories of Black queer folk in reflex response to whitewashed records such as And the Band Played On.

To lay claim that we, too, were there, I invoke Joseph Beam, Marlon Riggs and Essex Hemphill. But how do we remember the friends who inspired them, the audiences who supported their work, the families and lovers who fed them and one another? All generations of Black gay men deserve to know how we took care of one another long before AIDS service grants were offered for others to do so. Not only did we fight to survive. We fought for one another's lives."If we allow all those people who were a part of our lives to be forgotten," Keith notes, "then we have missed the point of it all."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/the-point-of-it-all-craig-washington