Together We Fight

June 24, 2016 By Casey Halter

Gregg Gonsalves first became involved in AIDS activism in the late 1980s, working with ACT UP Boston before moving to New York City, where he joined ACT UP New York's pivotal Treatment and Data Committee, whose members eventually founded Treatment Action Group (TAG). At the time, he was a college dropout working as a lab technician at Columbia University. By night, he and other activists taught themselves the basic medical science around HIV.

"I started working on opportunistic infections," Gonsalves recalls. "Then I got more involved with thinking about clinical trials and how drugs were approved." In the early '90s, Gonsalves decided to focus on accelerating research on HIV treatment and, along with Mark Harrington, Peter Staley and Spencer Cox, helped found TAG in 1991. Armed with data and science, TAG set out to restructure the way AIDS research was conducted at the National Institutes of Health. They succeeded. Gonsalves, who tested HIV positive in 1995, went on to serve 10 years at the helm of TAG.

Next, Gonsalves headed to the Gay Men's Health Crisis to advocate for HIV treatment and prevention. After that, he moved to South Africa and became involved in the global AIDS agenda with the Treatment Action Campaign. "TAC took treatment activism to another scale," Gonsalves recalls. "These were people who had come out of the antiapartheid movement. They were superb community organizers."

With the knowledge he gained in South Africa, Gonsalves returned to college. He hopes to earn his PhD at Yale by 2017. Working at the university as codirector of a program called the Global Health Justice Partnership, he teaches aspiring health and human rights leaders the lessons he has learned.

"GHJP works at the interfaces of public health, human rights and politics," says Gonsalves, "preparing students to go into a world that nobody ever trained us for." He and two other professors provide hands-on training to about 14 students every spring.

Gonsalves is quick to point out that the course doesn't just address HIV. Also on the syllabus are Ebola, tuberculosis, silicosis and cholera. He believes activists need to start focusing on these kinds of intersections.

"For me, the future of the AIDS epidemic is tied to Black Lives Matter; it's tied to Occupy Wall

Street, to the fight for abortion rights," says Gonsalves. "We're too small to win on our own, but if you start linking people for social and economic and racial justice, I think then you can get toward that goal."

When asked about the future of his activism, Gonsalves responds: "If I'm going to do anything for the next 20 years of my life, it's trying to figure out how to fight together."

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