After World AIDS Day

December 5, 2010 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Another World AIDS Day has come and gone. Mainstream media has gone back to mainly ignoring HIV unless there's a sensationalistic story attached. LGBT media has gone back to its mode of occasional coverage. Most people have already moved on.

But that reality doesn't take away from the importance of moments where most of the planet focuses on one thing, like the sportsmanship of the Olympics, the wrath of Mother Nature's latest verdict or both the horror and hope of World AIDS Day.

Each World AIDS Day is experienced differently by every individual, but my personal experience of it this year seemed to reflect the general state of AIDS in America.

With so much of the burden of the U.S. HIV/AIDS epidemic being borne by black and Latino men who have sex with men, I was pleased to be a guest at a World AIDS Day warm up event on Monday, November 29, at New York University (my alma mater) sponsored by the Office of LGBT Student Services titled "Living Out Loud: Men of color creating HIV awareness through their stories, art, and activism."

The MC of the event was Pedro Julio Serrano with performers Cornelius Jones, Brandon Lacy Campos and Tim'm West. Their spoken word performances did an excellent job of depicting our challenges and successes.

On World AIDS Day itself, Wednesday, December 1, I covered for POZ the protest at the Brooklyn Public Library outside the New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's annual World AIDS Day Bagel Breakfast, in which he hosts local HIV/AIDS community leaders.

Nine protestors affiliated with Housing Works were arrested, including Charles King, the group's president and CEO. All of the protestors were dressed as bagels to bring some humor to the protest--and get the media's attention. Their complaint was that the mayor always pledges to help but winds up instead proposing budget cuts to HIV/AIDS services.

Watch our video of the protest:

It was a rainy day in New York City on World AIDS Day. The rain kept people away from the protest, except the diehards--the protestors, the police and the media. Although the protestors were animated, the rain seemed to dampen the mood.

By the time I made my way to the 24-hour vigil in City Hall Park in Manhattan, in which names of people who have died because of HIV/AIDS are read out loud, the rain and wind got much worse. Again, the weather kept people away, except for, again, the diehards.

As I stood there in the rain and wind surrounded by only a small handful of people, I listened. I invoked in my head the names of family and friends the virus claimed so long ago that I admittedly had not thought of them in some time.

The tears came fast. I didn't try to stop them. It felt good to remember and to honor that pain, if only for that moment. Too often we forget what matters and why those things matter. I am grateful for the reminder.

Watch our video of the vigil:

In a year that saw so much progress in the science and policy of the fight against HIV/AIDS, it nonetheless was a year full of anxiety for the future direction of that fight. The world is still in a financial crisis and the resulting cuts to HIV/AIDS funding globally and domestically remain a real threat.

The inspiration of "Living Out Loud" and the disruption of the rain and the wind on the protest and the vigil were apt real life metaphors for my understanding of the general state of AIDS in America.

And now the countdown begins to World AIDS Day 2011. I pray the rain clouds stay away next time.

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