AIDS Kills 7,000 Gay Men In The U.S. Each Year

March 19, 2013 By Peter Staley

My comments this past weekend, after HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE won a GLAAD Media Award for Best Documentary:

Thanks to Herndon Graddick and GLAAD for this award, and for saying that this history is important. Thanks to Anderson Cooper for bringing our stories to a larger audience, for remembering our heroes like Spencer Cox, and for having the kind of empathy and humility that was exemplified by Vito Russo. And thanks to Joy Tomchin, Howard Gertler, the team at IFC, and especially David France, for beautifully capturing, for all time, those tragic yet inspiring years too few of us survived.

As Larry Kramer said, the AIDS activism that led to the breakthrough treatments in 1996 stands as the proudest achievement the gay population of this world can every claim. But let's face it. A lot of us walked away from the fight after the drugs came out. Given the overwhelming fatigue we all felt after 15 years of unrelenting death, wanting to put this behind us was understandable.

But the AIDS crisis didn't end. We've let our guard down, and it shows. An estimated 30,000 gay men in this country became infected with HIV in 2010. Gay men are only about 2% of the U.S. population, but we're now the fastest growing group of new infections, accounting for 63% of total infections in recent years. Most of these are young gay men, and over half of these 13-24 year-olds are black gay men. Why aren't these numbers shocking us?

Nearly 7,000 gay men still die from AIDS in this country each year. I realize that gay marriage is important and worth fighting for, but shouldn't our national gay rights groups be doing more than token levels of activism around HIV/AIDS? This is by far the biggest health care issue in the gay community, but we are getting rolled as on AIDS policy these days, whether it's the newly reinstituted ban on funding needle exchange, or laws criminalizing people with HIV, or the minuscule amounts the CDC spends for prevention targeting gay men.

We have the power and the tools now to turn around these infection rates. We proved it once, we can do it again. We can end this silence, and finish the job. We can all act up a little for the health of future generations. Thanks for listening.

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