Barricades to Boardrooms: in Praise of the Activist

May 2, 2008 By Paul Dalton

Today is May Day. In many parts of the world today is celebrated as International Workers Day. In others it is celebrated at the beginning of spring- my ancestors called today Beltane. In big cities across the US, it is now being celebrated as Immigrants Day. It is also the day of my first blog for Poz.com.

Who am I? I am Paul Dalton. I work for Project Inform- a San Francisco based, national non-profit fighting to end AIDS through treatment and public policy advocacy and information. I am also a person living with HIV- since 1992. I am also a person living with AIDS- since 1993.

May Day celebrates the struggle of workers for a better life. In that spirit I want to celebrate activism- specifically the first generation of fighters who forged a monumentally successful movement in the crucible of fear, stigma, illness and death.

As far as I know, the AIDS activist movement was one of the first times when a group of sick people and their allies consciously organized themselves to take on the government, scientific establishment and pharmaceutical industry. It was a creative and multi faceted force- from sits-ins, to mass demonstrations at the NIH, to shutting down the Golden Gate Bridge, to writing FDA regulations, to forming community advisory boards.

The courageous first generation of fighters faced daunting odds. Vilified, ostracized and feared they had few friends and many enemies in the corridors of power. Many were sick. Many were dying.

Still they fought, and largely won.

In 1981, all we knew was there was a new disease affecting previously healthy, young gay men. Soon after it was clear it was affecting others as well. By 1985 the cause was known. In 1987 the first drug- AZT- was approved. Today we have over 2 dozen treatments available. Where once ddC was approved based on its ability it keep people alive for 6 months longer than a placebo, some now feel people with HIV can begin to expect normal life spans.

The victories go well beyond the pharmacy shelves. The Ryan White Care Act- a remarkable piece of legislation that provides care and treatment services for people living with HIV throughout the

US- is emblematic of the work done in those halls of power. There are many others.

Of course the fight goes on. Internationally the lack of access to life saving medicines for the vast majority of people living with HIV in the world is nothing short of criminal. Even here in the US access to these drugs is uneven and fragile. The rate of new infections is stubbornly steady and possibly rising despite 20 plus years of prevention efforts. Vaccine development has sputtered.

There is much work to do. That is the work of today?s activists.

Today, I salute all of the activist who came before me. There can be no doubt that we would be much worse off it weren?t for the work done by those who sat in, who stormed, who picketed, who shut down, who sat down with regulators and scientists, who were arrested, who smuggled unapproved HIV drugs in from Mexico, who took the spirit of self determination and put it to work.

I owe you my life.

Note: if you want to learn more about Project Inform please visit our website www.projectinform.org

We have a national, toll free treatment Hotline, staffed by volunteers, most of whom are people living with HIV/AIDS. 1-866-HIV-INFO. We are open M-F, 10-4 pacific.

AIDS Activist Storm the NIH!- my first AIDS demonstration

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