A Defining Moment in amfAR's History

Originally published on Facebook, this blog post is in response to the POZ article titled "Is Kenneth Cole Shifting Blame for the Harvey Weinstein Charity Controversy?"

January 22, 2018 By Sean Strub

Kenneth Cole's arrogance has long been legendary, but his infliction of such harm on amfAR, by refusing to step down to save the organization, takes it to a new level.

He is destroying his legacy, insulting the memories of those who gave so much to advance AIDS research and, most upsetting, jeopardizing amfAR's ability to continue its level of support for cure research.

This is important and every person living with hiv (PLHIV), every advocate and every ally should be paying attention.

On February 7, amfAR's Board will choose to re-elect Ken Cole to its Board or not. AmfAR will suffer as long as Cole is there. We need the other board members to demonstrate leadership and courage and tell Ken Cole that amfAR's success is more important than his ego.

Aileen Getty, you are the only person openly living with HIV on the amfAR Board. I hope someone reading this knows you and will send it to you. We need you to speak out publicly and state that you cannot support Cole's continued tenure.

All of the largest PLHIV networks and scores of leading activists have called for his ouster. We need you, Ms. Getty, to represent us, your viral brothers and sisters, and let amfAR get past this embarrassing distraction and get on with its important cure research. We need you to step up.

Every amfAR Board member should consider themselves on notice. This is a defining moment in amfAR's history and for the epidemic.

The actions of the board members will indicate whether they are listening to and care about the plhiv community or not.

This might be the most important vote the current amfAR board members will ever cast and history will record whether they rose to the occasion or whether, at this critical inflection point for amfAR, they caved to ego, celebrity and intimidation.

I've shared Peter Staley's post below, but I don't share his despondency.

Ken Cole is going to go, it is just a matter of time and whether he resigns of his own volition, fails to be re-elected to the amfAR Board on February 7, or leaves later when the organization is further damaged and his inability to lead it becomes that much more obvious.

But an important underlying lesson is that this is the kind of thing that happens when the communities an organization purports to serve are not represented in meaningful ways on its boards of directors.

The idea that the largest private funder of AIDS cure research has no representation from any networks of PLHIV on its Board, and only one PLHIV on its Board, and newly on its board at that, ought to be a bright red flag indicating a serious problem.

(And, no, I have zero interest in an amfAR Board seat, but there are hundreds, if not thousands, of qualified PLHIV who could serve).

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