Dennis deLeon, R.I.P.

December 17, 2009 By Eric Sawyer

This is my first blog for POZ and I write it with extreme sadness; you see I just learned about the loss of one of the HIV movement's unsung heroes: Dennis deLeon, President of the Latino Commission on AIDS and well-known AIDS activist. Dennis died on Monday, December 14, at age 61.

Dennis learned he was HIV positive in 1986, and in 1993 he disclosed his HIV status in a New York Times Op-Ed entitled, "My Hopes, My Fears, My Disease." At the time he was the New York City Commissioner of Human Rights, appointed by Mayor David Dinkins.

In that editorial Dennis wrote: "For four years, I have been torn about when and how to say publicly that I carry H.I.V., the virus that causes AIDS. There were always too many compelling reasons not to say anything. Every such excuse started with the word "fear" -- fear of employment discrimination, fear of the politics of AIDS, fear of becoming a pariah."

He continued, "Given all of these reasons for not being public about the disease, why come out? ..." "The simple answer is hope. If more people proclaim their H.I.V. status, we will change the way society treats persons with the virus. My hope is not based on any expectation that discrimination will end tomorrow but on a sense that it is good to show society that people with H.I.V. are leading productive lives and will tenaciously resist attempts at exclusion."

I first met Dennis when he was the Deputy to the then Manhattan Borough President, David Dinkins. If memory serves me right it was 1988 or early 1989. I was representing ACT UP in discussions with the Office of the Borough President for his public support as we were trying to change NYC policies in order to expedite access for New Yorkers living with HIV to the safety nets of Medicaid, income maintenance payments, Food Stamps and rental assistance.

We approached the meeting with Dennis tentatively, not sure how he or Dinkins would respond, but hopeful that they would ally with our position. Dennis's response was terrific; he responded to our request from the perspective of a Human Rights advocate and social justice lawyer, not as a government official who was concerned about the costs to the city budget or setting a special precedent.

Dennis immediately demonstrated that he recognized and supported the urgent need for immediate access by people with HIV to the city's safety net. After we had explained why we were there, he literally stood up, took off his suit jacket, rolled up his shirt sleeves and sat down to help

us hammer out a strategy to win approval for our proposal.

That began a long term personal and professional collaboration between Dennis and me that lasted for many years. On a personal level, he assigned an attorney from the Human Rights Commission staff, after he became the NYC Commissioner of Human Rights, to investigate the cancellation of my surgery by a NYC physician after I had told the doctor that I was HIV positive. (The Human Rights Commission eventually levied sanctions against the surgeon and his hospital.)

Not too long after, the ACT UP Housing Committee, led by Keith Cylar, Charles King, Ginny Schubert and me, started Housing Works, Inc. We recruited Dennis to our Board of Directors and he eventually became our Board Chair. Dennis helped guide Housing Works from 1990 to 1996. (Housing Works is currently the largest US provider of housing, medical care, advocacy and services to homeless and formerly homeless people with HIV.)

Dennis was also instrumental in the AIDS communities' efforts to close the HIV detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. As the Commissioner of Human Rights he represented NYC on a committee to organize a high profile press conference and rally calling for the closure of the camp by the Clinton Administration. He also took part in the ACT UP organized related Civil Disobedience Action during which over 40 people were arrested, blocking traffic on Fifth Avenue in front of Rockefeller Center where the US Passport Offices were housed. Among those arrested that day were Dennis deLeon, Jessie Jackson, Jonathan Demme, Susan Sarandon, a dozen clergy members, the leaders of numerous AIDS service providers and me.

We eventually won the closure of the HIV detention camp, through a combined strategy that involved community organizing, a high profile publicity campaign and a legal challenge of the existence of the camp in US Federal Court system (the camp was ordered closed by US Federal Judge Sterling Johnson who ruled it was in violation of three International Human Rights treaties). Subsequently, Dennis played the role of chief liaison with the NYC government in helping to facilitate the enrollment of the detainees into the city social service system to provide the detainees access to safety net benefits.

Dennis eventually went on to become the President of the Latino Commission on AIDS (LCOA). The National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC) said of Dennis: "deLeon built LCOA from a two person operation into a major national AIDS organization addressing the disproportionate impact of HIV/AIDS among Latinos through advocacy and education programs. He helped lead the call for a National Latino AIDS Agenda, and in 2007, joined NMAC and seven other national minority AIDS organizations to work collectively as the National People of Color HIV/AIDS Working Group (POC). Together, the POC ensures that federal HIV- and health-related policies and the upcoming national HIV/AIDS strategy address the needs of underserved communities - and communities of color in particular - which have been hardest hit by the AIDS epidemic since it began."

Dennis was many things to many people. He was a loving partner to his companion of 32 years, Bruce Kiernan; he was a mentor to many in the HIV and social justice communities; he was a leader and an inspiration to people living with HIV. I always considered Dennis a great friend and a

perfect gentleman. The world is a better place because Dennis deLeon walked among us!

Rest in peace my friend!
- Eric Sawyer

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