Fighting Trump: HIV Advocates to Watch in 2017

January 10, 2017 By Mark S. King

Donald J. Trump and the Republican-controlled congress are a threat to everything HIV advocates have been fighting for during the last thirty years, and that includes access to healthcare, HIV prevention programs like PrEP, and the dignity with which we treat those who are most vulnerable to HIV infection.

This new political reality is reflected in the 2017 list of HIV Advocates to Watch from My Fabulous Disease. These inspiring advocates are speaking out, organizing and even conducting events only weeks after the election. They bring to mind the HIV treatment strategy of "hit hard and hit early." They grow in number every day.

You can be a part of this. In fact, you must be. Follow these advocates on social media, join their groups, take note of every link in their profile, and follow their advice. All it takes is for people like you to take one step toward change.

If you know a person or organization that is leading the resistance in your community, share their names and links to their work in the comments section. The more options we can provide to get involved, the better.

Here are the HIV Advocates to Watch in 2017.

TIM MURPHY
New York, NY

When shoppers visited Rockefeller Center one day during this holiday season, Tim Murphy helped make sure that ice skaters weren't the only photogenic moment available. A group of silent Santas, all wearing anonymous black masks, held signs with messages like "Trump's USA is Already Terrifying" and "Voted for Trump? Feel Lied to Yet?" while a trumpeter played a jaunty version of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas." The tableau was effectively haunting.

A longtime HIV journalist for POZ Magazine (and now the bestselling author of the must-read novel Christodora), Murphy is using the full force of his newly minted celebrity to come out swinging against Trump, employing an array of tactics ranging from street activism to community organizing. Most recently, Murphy helped mobilize dozens of people to show up in front of the home of Senator Chuck Schumer to demand "total obstruction of the Trump agenda."

"Medicaid expansion and Obamacare have offered healthcare to so many Americans with HIV/AIDS and now they're in jeopardy," said Murphy. "All social programs are." He also worries about the future of pro-LGBT prevention messages that have been created under Obama, particularly those addressing gay black men.

Murphy has simple advice for anyone looking to get involved in their community. "Follow or sign up to get alerts from two big national groups, such as Planned Parenthood and the ACLU, and two local groups, like your local #BlackLivesMatter or local immigration rights group," he offers.

"And then commit to acting on their action alerts, whether it's making phone calls or showing up for big key demonstrations in your city. Massive protests send a broad message that Trump's agenda will not be tolerated."

It sounds like you just got your marching orders.

(Photo credit: Gabello)

ANNE-CHRISTINE D'ADESKY
Oakland, CA

Community activist Anne-Christine d-Adesky is a veteran of ACT UP NYC and the co-founder of the Lesbian Avengers. For more than thirty years she has fought for social justice issues as varied as immigration rights, women's health, and anti-nuclear causes. That's right. She's a badass.

And she has now turned her attention to the man she calls Drumpf. "On the day after the election I launched my blog, Alice in Drumpfland," says d'Adesky, "and I put out a call to activist colleagues to join me in a collective response."

That response became with the formation of the Bay Area Queer Anti-Fascist Network (BAQAFN). "Some of us just call it 'Queer as Fuck,'" d'Adesky says. "It is meant to unite the local LGBTQ community and defend others under attack, "including communities who are targets of an emboldened American racism that Drumpf has invited."

d'Adesky also has serious concerns about the continued adoption of "religious waiver" policies and legislation that GOP legislators have advanced in Florida and Texas. "Dozens are being drafted at local levels now," d'Adesky warns, "that would allow businesses or individuals with federal contracts to 'opt out' of providing services to LGBTQ individuals on the premise of religious opposition to homosexuality. That means private and religious institutions, including hospitals and hospices, may refuse to treat HIV-positive individuals they assume may be gay or trans, or lesbians who need maternity care or trans women who just need a checkup. This we must fight."

This battle is nothing new, d'Adesky asserts. "We can look to the successes of the AIDS movement in the 90s for models to fight the moralist and far right. When our bodies were criminalized, we framed our fight in the context of human rights, which is where it sits. We also need to hold elected officials accountable. We need to push them to create new services if they are needed."

d'Adesky is busy organizing town hall forums for BAQAFN, writing her blog, planning vigils against Islamophobia, and even preparing for the release of her fourth book, an activist memoir. But she never lets her struggles get the best of her.

"I refuse to let Drumpf or any of these small-hearted individuals dictate my daily happiness," she says. So she dances, however and whenever possible. "It's fun… and keeps you in protest shape."

(Photo credit: Kawri Juno Photography)

JOSE de MARCO
Philadelphia, PA

“Being a person of color, I am forced to see the world through a racial lens,” says Jose de Marco, a community organizer for ACT UP Philadelphia who works with Prevention Point, the city’s only

syringe exchange program. “HIV impacts black and brown people, very hard. I fear what the Trump administration will do. His cabinet appointments say it all.”

de Marco’s advocacy focuses on the intersections of race, poverty, homelessness, and drug addiction. These issues compound HIV infection rates among people of color and “mirror high incarceration rates as well,” he says.

“This administration could criminalize syringe exchange despite the fact it has dramatically lowered HIV infections in the United States,” de Marco warns, but changes to our national health programs could have an even more massive effect.

“Because of racism and greed to provide tax breaks to billionaires, the repeal or cuts to the Affordable Care Act could happen,” de Marco says, “but with enough pressure Congress can find ways not to choke off health care to the most vulnerable populations. People should pressure their Senators to vote against the repeal of the Affordable Care Act and demand no privatizing of Medicare and Medicaid.”

“ACT UP will partner with other organizations fighting for health care and we will be using direct action, as we have for decades. We will not be turned back. Not one day.”

Find out more about the importance of needles exchange programs, and check out a new editorial in the New England Journal of Medicine from none other than President Obama that lays out the risks to health care if the ACA is repealed.

JD DAVIDS
New York, NY

“I am a trans person with race and class privilege who lives in relative safety,” says JD Davids, the enormously influential managing editor of TheBody.com and an activist voice to be reckoned with. “I’m also acutely aware of the backlash against trans people in the form of bathroom bills and unmitigated violence.”

Davids is by no means off-topic by focusing on the civil rights of transgender people. He sees a direct link between prejudice toward vulnerable communities and HIV risk. “An already-seen increase in bullying and hate and targeting of women, LGBTQ people and people of color contributes to accumulated trauma that, among other things, increases HIV risk or challenges in staying healthy if you have HIV.”

“I speak early and often about HIV issues to ensure that everyone gets clear information on the new HIV basics: HIV treatment is incredibly effective and much simpler than before; an undetectable HIV viral load means uninfectious; there’s a pill a day that can block HIV transmission; and bias, stigma and underlying marginalization of queers, trans people, people of color and drug users are the biggest barriers to ending the epidemic.”

Having a presidential administration that is “packed with leaders who either ignored HIV or put acutely harmful policies in place” is not going to be pretty, Davids believes. And he’s doing something about it.

“My fellow HIV activist Jennifer Johnson Avril and I have launched #ActivistBasics,” Davids explains, “which is providing practical tools and information for figuring out what to do and how to do it.” Their Facebook page is a treasure trove of helpful advice, Twitter chats, videos, and links to other resources. It is the perfect first stop for anyone who wants to resist the policies of the new administration.

It might be easy to feel intimidated by the sheer activism output of someone like Davids, but he wants you to know that there are easy ways to get started.

“Pull together an affinity group,” he advises as a first step, “a group of two to eight people who you know and trust, and start right where you are, as far as taking action together and supporting each other. It’s going to be a long haul. Don’t go it alone.”

(Photo credit: Louie Ortiz-Fonseca)

NAINA KHANNA
Oakland, CA

“Trump openly campaigned on a message of hatred and intolerance,” says Naina Khanna, director of the ferocious advocacy group known as the Positive Women’s Network USA (PWN), “something people living with HIV know all too well. The progress we’ve achieved in expanding the civil and

human rights to reflect the diversity of our nation will be stifled. What is at stake? Literally everything."

Fortunately for us, PWN has emerged as a forceful leader involved in everything from repealing HIV criminalization laws to local organizing to national political strategy like the annual day of congressional lobbying known as AIDS Watch. Those skills will come in handy in the years ahead.

"PWN will have a strong contingent at the Women's March in DC," says Khanna, "with members who can't make it to DC participating in simultaneous Women's Marches in cities around the nation. Our members have committed to making phone calls, sending emails and writing letters to the editor to put a face to many of these issues. Women have a legacy of innovation and resistance in the face of fear. We will build on that."

Khanna is helpful and extremely specific when it comes to tips on how you can make a difference. "Put your U.S. Senators and your Congressperson on speed dial on your phone," she offers, "that way it will only take a minute to call and voice your concerns or wishes. Find their contact information at Who Is My Representative? It's never a waste of time to call your elected representatives in Congress."

"If you are a woman living with HIV, including women of trans experience, join PWN-USA. If you are already a member but have been sitting on the sidelines, get more involved! Don't be afraid to venture outside the HIV silo, either. Get involved with your local Black Lives Matter chapter. If you are a white person wanting to support racial justice, find your local chapter of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ). and get involved in our newly launching anti-racist curriculum."

"There will be protests around the country the week of the inauguration," Khanna adds. "We hope to see you there!"

ASHTON P. WOODS
Houston, TX

In the summer of 2015, an incident at the progressive conference Netroots Nation galvanized activists across the country and arguably changed the focus of the presidential campaign.

During a forum with candidates Bernie Sanders and Martin O'Malley, more than 100 Black Lives

Matter protestors shut down the event and demanded the candidates address state violence against black Americans.

This blogger was there, and remembers the faces of attendees, who were surprised by the outburst and then confused and even intimidated by the chants and demands (perhaps they had never seen an ACT UP protest in the 80s). It was interesting and disheartening to me that, even among this liberal mix of people, Black Lives Matter was viewed as an uncomfortable irritant.

Ashton P. Woods was not only there at Netroots Nation, he helped to lead the protest. And he has absolutely no intention of softening the tactics that helped propel Black Lives Matter into the national consciousness. But there are differences, now that Trump has been elected.

“My work in racial justice just got a lot harder,” Woods says. The HIV positive activist knows how to meet a challenge, having co-founded the Houston chapter of Black Lives Matter and even now, as he creates Strength in Numbers, a project “to educate and lobby those in power about HIV.”

Woods has some experience protesting on the streets of Houston, and he encourages you to get involved on a local level as well. “Find out what the activists in your state need,” he says, “and then use your voice to speak up and fight back.”

(Photo credit: Eric Edward Schell Photography)

JEREMIAH JOHNSON
New York, NY

In 2014, a devastating outbreak of 200 new HIV infections occurred in a small Indiana town among heroin users. It could have been easily avoided if the governor at the time had not dragged his feet on syringe access programs (SAPs). That governor, Mike Pence, is the new vice-president of the United States.

Anti-science positions like this are only the tip of the ignorance iceberg, says Jeremiah Johnson, a policy coordinator for Treatment Action Group that is one the most visible leaders of the Trump resistance in New York City.

“The pick for the director of Health and Human Services, Tom Price, is also a vocal opponent of LGBT equality,” says Johnson. “HIV thrives on hatred and oppression, particularly within LGBT communities and communities of color, so we can expect that a racist, transphobic, and homophobic administration will likely increase the spread of HIV in our most vulnerable communities.”

Johnson sprang into action soon after the election. Working with fellow activists James Krellenstein, Jamila Headley, Milo Ward, and Jason Walker, the group held a town hall meeting in Manhattan “in opposition of the many destructive policy positions and societal ills represented by Trump and his administration.” It now attracts hundreds of people every Tuesday night and has been named “Rise & Resist.”

“If you fear the oppressive, dangerous policies of the Trump administration as much as I do,” Johnson advises, “give yourself permission to rise and resist, to act up and fight back. Let go of whatever holds you back, your shame and apprehension, your denial or hopelessness. Get organized and move into action, move off of social media and build resistance in the real world.”

“I am heartened by the work we are accomplishing here,” he continues, “but we need allies all across our nation, particularly outside of liberal bastions like New York City, if we have any hope of fixing this mess.”

(Photo credit: Terri Wilder)

JIM PICKETT
Chicago, IL

Jim Pickett speaks for himself and not in any official capacity as Director of Prevention Advocacy and Gay Men's Health at AIDS Foundation of Chicago. But when he does speak, he lets it rip.

"I plan to fight Trump every step of the way," says Pickett. "I will never, ever, ever normalize this

racist, misogynistic, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-LGBT, anti-science, ignorant bully who lost the popular vote by close to three million and who colluded with Russia to help him get 'elected.'"

"I will not sit on the sidelines and 'give him a chance.' There are no chances. We must mobilize and resist."

Pickett points to the crucial importance of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) as exhibit one. "Americans need the stability and security that quality, affordable health coverage provides to them and their families" he says. "No plan to repeal the ACA should strip away health coverage from the more than 22 million Americans who have accessed insurance because of this landmark legislation with an adequate plan to replace it."

Pickett has one word of advice for anyone looking to jump into the fray. "Focus, focus, focus," he advises. "There are so many outrages, so much to be angry about, so much to do. Trump and his minions would like nothing better than to see us running around all over the place, scrambled and uncoordinated. Don't give them that advantage. So, choose an issue area and focus your energies there. I will focus on health care access and the ACA, as my organization will be doing."

"Pick your issue and dig in deep. It will be easier said than done, but it is the only way."

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