From Baptist Minister To AIDS Activist, From Renegade To Leader

January 18, 2015 By Peter Staley

Fair warning -- for those of you who hate hero worship, you best skip this post. Over the last couple of months, I've developed a major activist crush on someone who's definitely not new to the fight against AIDS. Frankly, I've been humbled by the experience, being able to witness up close the remarkable skill and grace of a man who I now consider our country's greatest AIDS activist.Charles King is the President and CEO of Housing Works, and along with Mark Harrington (TAG's Executive Director), the impetus behind New York Governor Andrew Cuomo?'s push to end epidemic levels of HIV/AIDS by 2020.

I've known Charles since the early ACT UP years. He joined about a year after I did, and had a unique background, having graduated from Yale Divinity School. His father was a fundamentalist evangelical minister, and Charles became a Baptist minister in his twenties. My first memories of him were when we both joined the small, risk-averse ACT UP contingent that went to New Orleans to protest during the 1988 Republican Convention, with Reagan, Bush and Quayle.

He joined our Housing Committee after that, which led to his co-founding of Housing Works. The birth of what's now one of New York's most impactful AIDS service organizations was thankfully the only time I've ever butted heads with Charles, and I'm forever thankful I lost that skirmish. He came to the floor of ACT UP asking for seed-money for Housing Works. I was head of the fundraising committee at that point, and was worried about the precedent. ACT UP rarely had much in the bank, and we had never given a grant to another group. I thought we needed every dollar we had, so I foolishly opposed the proposal. I lost (in a lopsided vote, as I recall). Charles, and AIDS activism, won.

By the late 1990's, Charles was in full renegade mode. Housing Works was at war with Mayor Giuliani, especially after his administration cut-off $6.5 million in city grants to the organization (see "Charles King's Holy War" from New York Magazine, 8/17/98). AIDS activists loved him for his epic fights with Giuliani, but the dirty little secret was that few of them leaped to his defense. He had earned a reputation of "not working well with others," to put it kindly. I would often hear from fellow activists "Charles is crazy!" Crazy or not, he usually won his battles with Giuliani, and Housing Works has now become a model agency combining service and advocacy that few other AIDS groups rival.

That combination of service and advocacy has also given Charles a knowledge base that few other

activists rival. He knows the system inside and out, including how to change it when fixes are needed.

I never personally witnessed his crazy phase, if it existed, but the minister is back, with the wisdom only hardened fighters learn. There is love in his activism, and an understanding that we are all flawed but have voices and experience worthy of notice. Show me an “activist” that only sees their colleagues and adversaries in camps of good and evil, and I’ll show you an ineffective advocate for change.

Charles gets this, and his effectiveness has been snowballing. I watched him co-chair the governor’s AIDS task force, with its 64 highly-opinionated members, insanely tight schedule, and hundreds of community recommendations. His leadership was calm, focused, and brilliant. We got the job done. Watch his closing remarks below at the task force’s last meeting. After the requisite political thank-you’s, he reminded all of us why we’re in this fight, and of the ghosts that push us onward. And then he remembers a former adversary, the governor’s father, Mario Cuomo, who died on January 1st. He finds his goodness, and even a respect for the man’s legacy in this fight. Cynics will sneer, but they won’t be the ones that end this epidemic.

After you watch the video, take some time to read the ACT UP Oral History Project interview where Charles talks at length about his life and activism. If you don’t get choked up by the moment that sparked his coming out, then you don’t have a pulse.

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