Happy World AIDS Day

December 3, 2013 By Aundaray Guess

This past December 1st which is known as World AIDS Day I had a chance to see acknowledgments from the online community as they reflected on the day. On my Facebook timeline people were emphasizing the importance of knowing your status, recognizing those who had passed from the disease and a reminder that HIV was still here and much work had to be done in reducing stigma. In the middle of all the messages were four words expressing their sentiments of the day but not in a way I was prepared to read. The posting from several different people simply stated, “Happy World AIDS Day.” What?!? Happy World AIDS Day? And this just wasn’t on my feed but others all well. The announcement sounded so festive and celebratory so right away my head went to one side and then the other as I was trying to comprehend the postings. Was there a rule in how we received the day set aside to reflect and remember those living and have died from HIV or was I making something out of nothing? I think after a while of head shifting I had to ask myself what exactly was ’Happy" about World AIDS Day?

Based on my personal knowledge about World AIDS Day it is a day to both acknowledge those who have died from this disease and a time to create awareness in the hopes individuals will seek to know their status to stem the infection rates. It is also an opportunity to get those who were exposed into some type of early health treatment. As a day of remembrance there has been so many near and dear to us who has lost the battle to this disease. People who were at the prime of their lives and suddenly taken away. World AIDS Day events happen on this day as people of different backgrounds, wearing a red ribbon and lighting a candle, came together as the commonality was the impact HIV had made in each of our lives. If you wasn’t infected you were affected as World AIDS Day brought renew focus on the topic and a call to arm for new soldiers to step in line to help battle this disease.

And for those still on the fringes, providing them education and awareness and letting them know that HIV doesn’t discriminate based on race, sex or gender. And finally for those living with the disease, a coming together to say you’re not alone and don’t give up the fight. So why were we now announcing our happiness about this day?

Now before I sound off I know that the online posters were not coming from a place of coldness or indifference when they typed those four words on their news feed, but I do feel they were slightly unknowledgeable in the choosing of their words. I’ll even go a bit further and venture to say that those who wrote the statements were HIV negative as I can’t imagine someone HIV positive coming anywhere close to declaring “Happy World AIDS Day”.

The word itself feels like a festive occasion, one with balloons and confetti flying through

the air as party horns blared in the sky. I was thinking maybe I missed something and on that day there was going to be a parade to honor the day. I could just see the giant red AIDS ribbon floating in the air as blue colored marchers dressed like Truvada marched to the beat. Even worse I thought that maybe I was missing out on retail sales that usually accompany such holidays. "Today only all HIV medications are half priced" or better yet "The first 100 customers get a coupon to be redeemed for 50 t-cells to help boost their numbers."

I won't hammer the point to much but maybe World AIDS Day has got lost in translation as the years have went by, enough so that it was the new norm to celebrate the day. Perhaps the impact of AIDS/HIV is lessened because it's now a manageable disease and in our short term memory forgot it still is a deadly disease that affects and impacts ones quality of life. One may think all they have to do is take a pill but beyond the pill there remain related health issues that one has to endure. Not to mention the impact this disease has on personal relationships based on the stigma that accompanies having HIV.

Also the last time I looked, in certain places such as job and housing, people with HIV face discrimination because of their status. And when it comes to the African American community, HIV has increased compared to other ethnic groups. And while the rates are rising in said communities, funding to prevent and educate has decreased with neighborhood HIV agencies having to lay off staff, reduce their programming and in some cases closing their doors leaving a gap in services.

But here's the rub. After making my case on why it doesn't seem appropriate to say Happy World AIDS Day, my epiphany moment came when I asked myself why not Happy World AIDS Day? Being aware of the history of HIV/AIDS we sometimes forget there is so much to celebrate. Compared to years past we have seen achievements in so many areas. Take for example the medication AZT, the first prescribed medication for HIV. When it seemed that was the only option we now have a full menu of HIV medications that has made it possible for the disease to be manageable. Also I would venture to say doctors are more specialized to care for those living with this disease unlike the past when it was a mystery. Also public perceptions have shifted. It may not be where we want it to be, as stigma still prevails, but many nontraditional places such as the church and schools are having discussions on HIV where there was once silence.

I think the greatest celebration is that now more than ever people are putting their own face on the disease and talking about their experiences, whether it's blogging, reporting, writing, speaking and more creative ways. And through these telling stories others are made to feel that they are not alone. Can you imagine a black bald headed man sharing his health status of HIV twenty years ago? Based on how we saw people living with HIV in the past, the stories shared no longer operate in silence but in a shared space. And another victory is the word I have used constantly in this post 'manageable'. If there is anything to celebrate is that HIV is no longer seen as a death sentence as it was before and with adherence to proper treatment, people are living long full lives.

World AIDS Day will still have its significance but what is wrong with celebrating our victories. As soldiers in this war what harm is it to take one day and lay down our arms and embrace won battles? As people gather together to commiserate the day we still need that moment no matter how brief to appreciate the work we have done and to remind each other that although we are still at war, to not give up or give in. HIV has taken away so much why must it

steal our ability to be joyous even for one day?

So taking all that into account there is a reason to say and embrace World AIDS Day. Yes it may sound offensive but understanding the progress that has been made I find the celebration and the attitude to say to anyone who hears, Happy World AIDS Day!!

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