A History of HIV/AIDS in One Astonishing Poem

November 10, 2018 By Mark S. King

The team behind the 20th Anniversary Community Summit, being held in Atlanta this weekend and sponsored by ViiV Healthcare, knew how to open the event today on exactly the right foot. The first words attendees heard were the poetry of Mary Bowman, delivered by the award-winning spoken word artist herself.

Anyone who reads this blog knows my admiration for anyone creating art about HIV and its surrounding issues. I've had the pleasure of seeing Mary Bowman perform and have profiled her before. She is a poet and a woman living with HIV and her talent brings chills. Her delivery only adds to the experience, so be sure to check out her Youtube channel (and her book, Emerge: A Collection of Poems, might make a lovely holiday gift).

Here is the piece Mary Bowman performed for the crowd of people with HIV, community advocates, public health officials, and various allies in our collective struggle at the opening of the summit this morning. Her words manage to capture the entire history of the epidemic and they paint gorgeous verbal pictures along the way.

The Art of Possibilities

I was once told that in order to move forward
One must be aware of the past
So as not to repeat such

Sankofa, a gift from Ghana
Teaches us, it is wise
To not only peer into the past
But to also collect nuggets

Necessary for the journey

The art of living

A type of wisdom only afforded to those
Who aren't afraid of the dark

Oh, Remember how dark it was
When the boogeyman
Walked into the disco

Not too far from the hole in a stonewall
Sashayed to the rhythm of
Fresh freedom
Sexual revolution
Untelevised

When the closet doors crept open
The boogeyman tiptoed out behind Us
There was no intention on closing the door

Remember the time
we fell in love
In san francisco
Around the same time
We fell into a trap

Picture this not sicily
But the castro 1981
CDC say something
About declining immunity
In gay men
Something we knew all too well

Death is apart of life
But who wants to die
Right after one has become alive

121 people made plans for tomorrow's
That would never come

Finally a flashlight

1982
San Francisco AIDS Foundation
Gay Men's Health Crisis
The same year the boogeyman got its name
Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

1984 the community joined forces
Forming AIDS Action

All while the band still played on
Maybe Reagan didn't hear about the 4251
Deaths in our nation so far

1985 we lost Rock Hudson
Gained ELISA and Ryan White
Turns out,
AIDS isn't only for the GAYS
Reagan finally has the guts to say
AIDS
The boogeyman made his way to the corners of the world

1986 Cleve Jones turns numbers into names
HIV was declared the virus that causes AIDS
NMAC comes in to help

1987 the great liberace retires permanently from life
Time to ACT UP
Take AZT
And show the world better than we can tell them

Laying out 1920 panels of names on a quilt
Down the street from Reagan
Big enough to combat the coldness of years of negligence

1988 while I was cooking in my moms belly
Elizabeth Glaser
Provided a safety net for babies like me born with HIV

Ryan White testifies to provide better tomorrows for us all
December 1 the world remembers those lost and supports those living

As a community
We turned the lights on in the 90s
When the lights come on after the party
It's not a pretty sight
But luckily we had organizations like ACTUP
Who didn't mind it sweaty, exhausted eyes
Barefooted with heels in hand
Could no longer keep quiet
Because Women get AIDS too

The 90's brought us hope
Taught us the Magic in humanity

As we watched Hydeia tearfully tell Earvin
And the World that “We’re just normal people”

Art imitates life in Philadelphia
Visual AIDS launch Red Ribbons
NMAC and NAPWA build USCA
AIDS Watch
We get HAART
PACHA

At the end of the century
The boogeyman is exposed
Standing in the light of love

This is the art of living
This is the art of strength
Courage
Tenacity
Community

The art of possibility
Is pursued by those unafraid of the dark
Those who come to be a source of light

Like Viiv Healthcare
Their arms stretching the span of 20 years
Providing space to share information
Insights and experiences

Calling on the community
To drive the conversation
To provide the questions
To find answers
While remaining a resource

understanding the importance of
Intergenerational Connection
Viiv offers space for the youth
To keep the lights on
Developing leaders of tomorrow

Because the boogeyman won’t live forever
We work relentlessly toward an end
No matter what color, age, sexual orientation, gender identity

The best way to eradicate AIDS is together

When it’s all said and done
We will pack our pain stained posters
Pins labeled with our lives
And close doors we fought so hard to open

We will say farewell to the days
Our eyes were filled with what seemed an ever flowing river
The days when our bodies painted cities and towns the color red
When our voices strained broken yet kept speaking

Our hands blistered and bloody holding on to the promise of the end

We will throw away our stigmas as well as the world’s
We will throw away the doubts and the fears
We will only hold on to our stories

The ones we carried through decades of suffering
Our ribbons, the banners of our pride
Our loss of friends and family
And I don’t know

If we will have enough energy

Or even the desire to ask

What happened

Or why the world was so mean

We will probably just say thank you

Because what’s a good fight

Without worthy opponents

What is love, absent of hate

What is strength without pain

What would be life without our patchwork quilt of death

We will say Thank you

Because it was all worth it

— Mary Bowman

Thanks for reading, my friends, and please be well.

Mark

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