HIV/AIDS Rally and Vigil

October 12, 2009 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

The National Equality March for LGBT civil rights took place on Sunday, October 11 (on the 30th anniversary of the first LGBT march on Washington, DC, which is now commemorated yearly as National Coming Out Day).

Several related events took place throughout the weekend, including an HIV/AIDS rally and vigil on Saturday, October 10, on the Ellipse in front of the White House. Many HIV/AIDS advocates from around the country (and around the world) participated in the HIV/AIDS rally and vigil.

(The photo is of the crowd holding up glow sticks to represent candles during the vigil.)

Friends of *POZ* were well represented. Dennis Daniel, *POZ*'s comptroller, was the stage manager for the event. Sean Strub, *POZ*'s founder, was scheduled to speak and singer and actress Sherri Lewis (also a former *POZ* cover girl) was scheduled to perform, but the event ran behind schedule and the park officials shut us down at our scheduled ending time of 8:30 p.m.

Plenty of others did get to participate. Even though she didn't get to sing, Sherri Lewis was master of ceremonies. *POZ* contributor Shawn Decker (also a former *POZ* cover boy) and his Synthetic Division bandmate Marshall Camden performed. Speakers and performers from numerous organizations were represented.

I also had the privilege of speaking just before the vigil portion of the event, which was in honor of those who have died from HIV/AIDS. My speech was billed as a "call to action" and I can only hope that it lived up to that expectation. It was an honor to participate.

Here's the text of my speech:

When I was diagnosed with HIV in 1992, I was 22 years old. Back then, I believed that I would die before my 30th birthday. Today, thanks to my access to health care and my efforts to stay healthy, I stand here looking

forward to my 40th birthday.

In addition to being HIV positive, I am also a gay Latino, a native New Yorker and a former Marine (Uncle Sam told me I was HIV positive). I told my parents I was gay in 1996, but not until 2008 did I tell them I was HIV positive. Such was the stigma I attached to HIV. Stigma kills. It must be defeated.

My story is my own, but it is an American story -- and that is what we all share. As Americans, we are all entitled to “certain inalienable rights ... life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” In other words, civil rights.

Tomorrow, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans -- and our allies -- will march for our civil rights. More than half of new HIV infections in the United States unfortunately are among men who have sex with men -- almost one in two of them are African American, almost one in five are Latino and more than one in five are white. So it is fortunate that our rally today reaffirms

the connection between LGBT people and people living with HIV/AIDS. Fighting homophobia and racism helps to fight stigma and discrimination related to HIV/AIDS.

Approximately half of all HIV-positive Americans have insufficient healthcare coverage -- or none at all. Almost half of new HIV infections are among African Americans, almost one in five are among Latinos and almost a third are among women. Asians and Pacific Islanders, Native Americans and transgender people are affected disproportionately. Men who have sex with men are far from being alone in this fight.

Our common struggle is the American struggle. “We the people” -- those of us living with and affected by HIV/AIDS (all Americans) -- deserve to be heard by our government and have our grievances remedied.

Government alone cannot solve all of our problems, but it must at least address them. Comprehensive health care reform needs to be on our agenda, as well as using

evidence-based approaches -- and increasing resources -- for prevention, treatment and finding a cure to end this epidemic once and for all.

With President Obama in the White House, we have a unique opportunity to advance our cause, but we also need to act. This weekend is only the beginning.

POZ wants to help the community in this effort. Tell us your comments at poz.com/advocacy and we will deliver them to the White House.

Call and email your legislators. Donate your time and your money to advocacy groups. Attend one of the official town halls set up by the White House seeking comments on the creation of a national HIV/AIDS strategy. If you cannot attend an official town hall, organize a meeting in your community and send your comments to the White House. And -- if you can -- disclose your HIV status. As with disclosing your sexual orientation or gender identity, coming out about being

HIV positive can help erase stigma.

HIV/AIDS is a formidable enemy, but we can -- and we shall -- overcome. As the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Junior said, “The arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice.”

As we remember those who have died from HIV/AIDS, let us honor them by leaving here energized and filled with hope.

Gracias! Thank you!

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