Making HIV History By Remembering Ours

June 29, 2014 By Paul Kawata

The following is a guest post by National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC) Deputy Executive Director Daniel C. Montoya

Few things expose a society's inequities like a crisis. In America, periods of conflict, or social and economic upheaval, reveal the best and worst of our collective nature. From our founding document, which enshrined racial inequality into the Constitution, to Japanese internment camps during World War II, America's most celebrated moments are often blemished by our imperfections. The early years of the AIDS crisis were no different. We witnessed terrible displays of bigotry and fear, but also incredible examples of generosity and heroism. Like so many crises before it, the HIV/AIDS epidemic forced us to confront the impact of the inequities that had persisted since our founding, including our history of racism and marginalization of impoverished communities. But unlike previous crises in our country, this one forced America to confront its treatment of an often-invisible minority, the gay community.

While communicable diseases have no gender, race or sexual orientation, and hold none of the biases that so many people do, they will often impact specific populations differently according to various epidemiological processes, as well as social dynamics. In those first years, just as today, HIV was predominately focused in the LGBT community. And while the modern gay rights movement started 12 years earlier at a small inn and tavern in New York City, it wasn't truly set ablaze until the 1981 report of five cases of Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) among previously health young gay men in Los Angeles - the very first cases of AIDS ever published.

LGBT individuals have been present through the entirety of human history, helping to shape our world. But as a movement, ours is relatively new. While there have always been brave gay men and women who stood up against hatred and injustice, the larger movement for LGBT equality did not emerge until 1969 when a police raid of the Stonewall Inn sparked a riot and a battle for equality that has raged for 45 years. Activists like Bayard Rustin and Harvey Milk nurtured the nascent movement through the next decade, but when AIDS began ravaging gay centers from San Francisco to New York our struggle for fairness transformed into a battle for our lives.

As movements, the LGBT and HIV/AIDS communities have always shared a common history, and so it should be no surprise that June, officially recognized as LGBT Pride month, is also quite important to the HIV movement. Friday, as it does every year on June 27, our nation marked National HIV Testing Day, an annual observance that coincides with the anniversary of the

Stonewall riots, which began this night in 1969 and lasted well into the next morning. On June 5, 1981, the first reported AIDS cases were published in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. And just last year, on June 26, the Supreme Court struck a massive blow to those who oppose marriage equality by striking down Prop 8 and gutting the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA).

We have made great progress in our fight for equality and an end to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Today, our movements are making major strides at a rate that our founders could never have imagined. In the year since the Supreme Court handed down its gay marriage decisions, courts in 20 states have ruled against gay marriage bans, with the most recent coming down this week in Utah. In January, the Affordable Care Act came into full effect, with total enrollment surpassing the White House's goal of 7 million by the end of March - despite widespread conservative obstruction. Last month, the CDC published official guidance to health providers on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). And just one week later, the CDC made history with the release of its new social marketing campaign "Start Talking. Stop HIV," the first federally funded HIV education campaign exclusively focused on gay men of various races and ages, and also the first to feature the prevention benefits of treatment.

As our nation marks National HIV Testing Day and the anniversary of the Stonewall riots, we must remember that just as our histories are closely intertwined, so too is our future. Despite our multitude of policy successes, we have failed to make any real progress in reducing HIV infections within our community. Gay and bisexual men are the only population facing increasing rates of infection, with young black gay men experiencing the most severe spike. We cannot truly achieve victory in our struggle for equality until we have also achieved LGBT health equity, including an end to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Our history has demonstrated our capacity to accomplish amazing things, and making this terrible disease history will be just such an achievement. But we cannot do it separately. As we close out another LGBT Pride month, lets commit to making this the closing chapter of our AIDS history.

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