Sean Strub on Activism

June 8, 2009 By Shawn Decker

Through my boyish charm and way with the written word, I was able to catch up with Sean Strub online and get his thoughts on the early days of AIDS activism, as well as what went down in Hollywood last Friday at the protest...

Hey Sean, how did the protest in CA go?

Sheryl Lee Ralph was amazing, passionate, well-informed and rallied the crowd. She spoke several times. There was no civil disobedience. The crowd was lively and worked up, but not especially large.

Sounds good. Do activist groups like ACT UP have more potential for change with Obama in the White House as opposed to Bush?

I think it depends on the specific issue at hand. Certainly the potential for change with Obama is vastly greater than with Bush, but the process to affect that change is much different. With Bush, we were totally iced out; with Obama we have people like Jeff Crowley, the former deputy director of NAPWA, as his federal AIDS Policy Coordinator. He's just one example, but across the administration the level of expertise and experience with the epidemic is vastly greater and comes from a different perspective.

It's seems like you'd have to be nicer with an administration that might actually help you, but then again, it's easier to get angry at someone whom you expect more from...

I wish they would have already lifted the ban on needle exchange and other things, but the single most important thing the Obama administration can do for people with HIV is to get universal health coverage. If everything else, in terms of the epidemic, needs to be put on hold in favor of that priority, for strategic reasons, then I am willing to be patient.

While you are being patient, care to reflect on a favorite personal ACT UP moment from the past?

In terms of specific moments the two that first come to mind are when Peter Staley, and I were on top of the roof of Sen. Jesse Helms' house, unfurling the giant condom.

I love that one. It's a Will Ferrell movie waiting to happen.

There’s also the moment during the Stop the Church! demonstration at St. Patrick’s cathedral when I took communion. The group I was part of (were we called the “Hail Marys”?) all took communion and when the priest held up the consecrated host and said “The Body of Christ” we would say something like “Safe Sex is Moral Sex!” or “I support a woman’s right to choose!” or whatever. I said “May the Lord bless the man I love who died a year ago today” as it was the anniversary of Michael Misove’s death.

That’s hardcore, Sean. And I love that phrase, by the way, “Safe Sex is Moral Sex”. Thanks for sharing the activist insight, and if there’s ever another home that needs to be fitted with a giant condom, count me in.

You bet.

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