What Today's Politicians Could Learn From Ryan White

It's been 30 years since the Ryan White CARE Act was signed into law, the result of bi-partisan support. Could that have even happened now?

August 18, 2020 By Shawn Decker

It's been three decades since The Ryan White CARE Act was signed into law by President H.W. Bush. Ryan, who was a national treasure for his advocacy for all people with HIV, passed to spirit earlier that same year. Familiar with his story, politicians who had gotten to know his mother, Jeanne, urged her to pick up the torch for her son. And through her advocacy she garnered bi-partisan support for what had been originally titled The Ryan White GAVE A SHIT, YOU SHOULD, TOO Act.

Okay, everything above is true except for the Ryan White GASYST Act.

The AIDS Institute commemorated the occasion by calling for continued funding for Ryan White, unimpeded by the current pandemic which is all but certain to negatively impact a already vulnerable HIV/AIDS community.

Ryan White became a household name in 1985, when he was kicked out of public school for having HIV. He'd contracted the virus as the result of tainted blood products, used to treat his hemophilia. After the dust up, Ryan decided to channel his energy towards educating people about the epidemic; not just the facts about how the virus was and wasn't transmitted, but also the stigma that surrounds. He made no distinctions between himself and anyone else who had contracted the virus.

It was an immensely important message and a nice counter-balance to the fierce activism of the day. The gay community demanded to be heard and used any means necessary to draw attention to the health crisis, and the hemophilia activist community focused on insuring a safer and more transparent blood supply for everyone. Undoubtedly, the messaging of both groups was infused with a potent combination of anger and grief. Understandable, the personal losses continued to mount with cruel efficiency. Ryan's power, however, lied in his ability to speak softly and surely about the heavy topic. It was HIV awareness with a dimple, and audiences who felt like HIV could never happen to them were less able to change the channel when they saw Ryan, who reminded them of their own children.

Back to the future...

Could the Ryan White CARE Act pass today? Sadly, the answer is no. At least not now, in my opinion. COVID-19 marks a dangerous precedent: the politicization of a public health crisis. Whereas Reagan just decided to not mention AIDS or take it seriously because it was “a gay disease”, Trump has provided a toxic mix of denial and misinformation. The current climate should send a chill down any spine, regardless of political affiliation. And when a public health plan is allegedly scrapped because, initially, the virus was impacting “blue states” (Republicans lived in those too, last time I checked), then we have reached a terrifying and depraved new low.

I hate to say it, but I’m not sure if Ryan’s compassion and dimple could make a dent in today’s climate.

But I sure wish he were still here to give it a shot.

Stay safe out there, folks.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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