

Weiner Should Have Let it All Hang Out

July 30, 2013 By [Visual AIDS](#)

The latest sexting allegations against Anthony Weiner hit the day of the Mayoral Candidates Forum, Focusing on HIV/AIDS was held at GMHC. With Weiner falling behind in the polls since then, Visual AIDS program manager Ted Kerr suggests Weiner should have seized the perfect storm of the scandal and the event to talk about his own experiences, create solidarity with people living with HIV, and begin a frank discussion about sex, risk and unjust outcomes.

The Mayoral Candidate Forum Focusing on HIV/AIDS at GMHC started late because front-runner Anthony Weiner was apologizing in the next room. More sexting stories had surfaced, a setback for Weiner who was starting to overcome a related scandal from two years ago in which he resigned from Congress after it came out he was carrying on sexual online relationships outside of his marriage.

Earlier in the day fellow Democratic hopefuls Bill de Blasio and Sal F. Albanese asked Weiner to pull out of the race. He declined. Candidate John Liu told reporters, “The issue of Anthony’s relationships, online or otherwise, is between he and his wife, however the propensity for pornographic selfies is a valid issue for voters.”

While I am not sure it is a valid issue for voters, I do think that a discussion of them, started by Weiner, could be the beginning of a liberatory discussion around sex, drive and desire. Sitting, admiring the Keith Haring installation that bordered the 7th floor GMHC lunchroom where the forum was taking place, I hoped Weiner would use the occasion to talk about what he was going through. After all, how could he

not? Wasn't the forum a perfect site? The audience was people living with HIV, and those impacted by the virus, all of who know what it is to suffer because of society's ideas of right and wrong. AIDS, for all the leaps and bounds made in research and medicine, is still complicated by stigma and discrimination. While being caught sexting is not the same as living with HIV, Weiner would be wise to seize the moment, and create community. Keith Haring, even in his final months, used his public persona to create awareness of HIV/AIDS. Certainly the virile Weiner could also do the same.

Weiner was in the perfect position to illustrate how the public's focus on sexting, instead of his record as a City Councilor and a member of the House of Representatives, was just one example of the stigma attached to sex that makes safer sex education, prevention campaigns, and getting people on treatment more difficult.

He was well poised to discuss sexting as a safer sex method, yet not without risks.

He was in a place where he could easily distance himself from his predecessors, such as Koch and Giuliani, whose puritan approach to sex not only cost people's lives (in Koch's case), but also gutted in the city (under Giuliani's rule).

And, he was situated to establish himself as something we know him to be, and someone relatable - a sexual being.

While talking about sex could be seen as a political risk, the pay off for ushering in a frank discussion may be worth it. He was after all the star attraction and sex is still the leading mode of HIV transmission. In 2010, as the CDC reports, around 30 000 new HIV infections occurred between men who have sex with men, just over 10 000 between heterosexuals, and far less than 10 000 through intravenous drug use. Since the late 80s there has been a sharp decline in HIV transmission through drug use due to needle exchange, and a concerted effort to talk about HIV and drug use. The same cannot be said around sex and HIV.

Watching Weiner, who I had only known as a tabloid subject, was impressive. With every response he connected with the audience, and in between questions he joked with his fellow contenders. Like other candidates, he felt rent caps and HASA had to change and agreed the ways in which HIV advisory board needed an overhaul; he rejected the idea that the City should consult the State about property issues that impacted the poor; and talked briefly about infections rates related to race. With every response Weiner got up, inching himself in closer to Haring's drawings, establishing himself as a man who stood up for what he believed in.

At his most remarkable Weiner brought up undocumented gay people and access to healthcare, and the challenges facing trans folks navigating New York's bureaucracy. He did this with a deft touch, and an implied understanding that immigration reform, and self-determination (read: justice) are forms of HIV prevention.

He put on a good show. As *The New York Times* reported the next day, Weiner, "spoke passionately about issues like housing, gay rights and health care, distinguishing himself from his rivals by rising from his chair and gesticulating forcefully, the audience responded warmly, with shouts of "Yes, that's right!" and "You the man!"

But for all the good he did, he did not deliver. At the center of a public conversation about desire and his body, speaking about HIV/AIDS, he did not say the word sex. He could have created

solidarity, raising the profile of those who experience stigma because of sex. He did not use his privilege and unique circumstances to improve the life chances for others. He let down a group of people that could have been his best allies.

A sex positive mayor would have gone a long way for the clients of GMHC, VOCAL and Iris House (all of whom were in attendance) and the people we work with at Visual AIDS - but they will go on without Weiner. If polls are any indication, Weiner may not survive the race.

Weiner should have taken a page out of his personal playbook and exposed himself. He should have talked about sex. He missed an opportunity to show himself as a real leader, and someone deeply invested in ending the AIDS crisis. Instead, he stuck to what was expected of him, thus further enshrining the shame already surrounding sex, entrenching the notion that sex is only a private affair (even though through his actions and the ramifications illustrate otherwise), and adding to the silence around sex we know exasperates the epidemic.

Sadly, he was not alone. Not once during the forum was sex discussed in a meaningful way, not by a candidate, or the moderators. The word sex itself was barely uttered. One exception being when John Liu remarked that his interns had made safer sex condom packs at GMHC in the past.

30+ years into the epidemic and the most we can expect from the best and the brightest hoping to lead a city with a higher HIV rate than the next 3 cities combined is an off the cuff remark about condoms. Even in 2013, at a mayoral candidate forum on HIV/AIDS, with a leading contender embroiled in a sexting scandal, we still can't have a public discussion about sex.

While Weiner may shirked an opportunity that was his to have, all the candidates failed to address the AIDS crisis head on by not talking about sex.