Will The Denver Principles Ever Be Relevant To Black People Living With HIV & AIDS?

June 10, 2013 By Larry Bryant

As much as I respect and acknowledge the impact the **Denver Principles** had when written, I challenge its relevance and importance to today's impacted community. Among women, young people, and people of color in particular, the historical document has as much influence and resonance as the United States Constitution - in defining '*We the People*' its original authors did not have all of us in mind. This is not to imply that the Principles co-authors were racist or sexist. However, there is a problem with how we perceived the epidemic at its beginning and how we repeatedly and incorrectly 'labeled' the epidemic out of fear and ignorance. You also hear something very different and dramatic when you ask different people about its meaning.

Written in 1983 by 12 men during the National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference in Denver (CO), the document helped to define the respect and dignity of people living with and dying from AIDS-related illnesses in the early years of the epidemic as a right. While condemning the label of '*victims*', the Denver Principles went on to provide recommendations that ensured involvement at '*every level of decision-making and specifically serve on the boards of directors of provider organizations*' and '*equal credibility as other participants*' in sharing experiences and knowledge. It articulated in no uncertain terms the right of people with AIDS '*to die - and LIVE - in dignity*' when much of this country refused to even say the letters H - I - V.

In the mid-80's much of the country also believed, because incorrect labeling by the CDC as the **4H Disease** (Haitians, homosexuals, hemophiliacs, and heroin users) or **GRID** (gay-related immune deficiency), that AIDS indeed was a White gay male disease. And though the early 90's brought us the **Ryan White Care Act** and other HIV & AIDS-related services and care, the U.S. continued to see meteoric growth in the epidemic in inner cities and rural communities in the South - many of whom were heterosexual men and women of color.

The terrifying atmosphere that engulfed me and many others like me in the mid-80's was one many of us did not survive. The fear of acquiring the deadly virus was equal to instant death. Not just because of the images of wasting and dying of horrible, indecipherable deaths were front page news, but because many of us - including me - would rather die from our own self-destructive

hands than suffer through the horrible transformation; or worse, have someone find out. Dignity and respect did not live in Norfolk (VA). Hate and violence against people suspected of having *the package* were not only allowed in places like Jackson (MS) and Baton Rouge (LA), they were encouraged and organized.

As a young Black man I've grown up knowing, loving, and losing many friends who never knew *'full and satisfying sexual and emotional lives'* and never thought they had a choice. Now 26 years living with HIV, I sit with men and women of similar age that who never knew the Principles, or knew them but figured it didn't apply to them. Maybe it's because of the heroic ownership that some gay White men hold to the activist history within this epidemic. I still remember the shouts from a few gay white men in south Florida to Black women participating in the same rally for access to care, "Go home! Black people have stolen our epidemic!" Perhaps it stems from the 1996 essay by Andrew Sullivan 'When Plagues End' that essentially announced the end of the AIDS epidemic for him by having access to life-saving drugs. Though he apologized later saying that it was 'easily the most offensive thing I ever wrote', the damage had been done.

The truth is that a far majority of us living with and affected by HIV and AIDS have lost histories riddled with name changes and relocation; torturous separations from families and loved ones and arduous battles with psyche and self, facilitated mind-altering and reality-escaping substances. We've hoped for a rescue that never appeared. Often, in regard to HIV advocacy history and as a Black heterosexual man, there was always a party we weren't invited to. So we all decided to create our own party, our own history, our own dignity and rescue. And as this epidemic continues to get younger and further impact the super poor,

I know that I have a lot of friends and allies who will have tremendous problems with me for saying these things and that's fine, I'm a big boy. Additionally, the idea that we are in some search mode for a new national voice for people living with HIV is ludicrous, since many of the same people also believe we should have no meaningful contact with those voices. Rather than passing down lyrics of some old, distant song some of us grew up with, maybe we should construct a melody with lyrics and rhythm we can all contribute to. It doesn't take long to figure out where that is happening and where it is encouraged and supported.

Yes, the Denver Principles live on and for many will continue to be a profound and powerful statement in HIV & AIDS advocacy history. Many others, like me live and breathe very different histories with different languages. Our success in ultimately defeating this epidemic and related social justice issues will not come from dusting off old documents but shaping our collective mission statements and goals to fit all of us.

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