World AIDS Day at the White House

This is my experience of being in the room when the President used the bully pulpit to commit to ending the HIV epidemic by 2030.

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Ending HIV is about more than stopping a virus. To be successful, it's about creating a world that is more equitable. It gives voice and power to communities who for too long have been denied justice. Ending HIV is the symbolic expression of our fight for racial justice and health equity. I was fortunate to be invited to the White House for World AIDS Day. I share the experience not to brag, but to be your eyes and ears to history. Work to end the epidemic starts by reading the plan. The White House event was the public declaration of support from the Biden/Harris administration. Due to COVID, not everyone could attend. We are all part of this history. This is my experience of being in the room when the President of the United States used the bully pulpit of the White House to commit to ending the HIV epidemic by 2030.

I live close enough to walk. It was a beautiful cold December day. I journeyed down Black Lives Matter Plaza to see the two-story Red Ribbon at the front of the White House. During the Regan years, I was arrested at the exact same spot where I am now a guest. Seeing the ribbon was bittersweet because there are too many friends who should be here.

Since it is a few weeks before Christmas, everything was festive and decked out for the holidays. The entry was an archway of boxes wrapped as gifts. It felt like a huge gift to be invited. Most of the guests were taking selfies at these Instagramable moments. Here I am with John Barnes (Funders Concerned About AIDS) and Arianna Lint (Arianna's Center). While you see our smiling faces in the pictures, we only took off our masks for photos. With all our time in isolation, people weren't sure if we should hug or bump elbows. Since I had my booster, I'm hugging everyone, but with a mask on.

The White House is the physical representation of America's power in the world. As a result, staff work very hard to make everything perfect by paying attention to the details. It's kind of like Disneyland on steroids. Everyone is so polite and happy. Members of the military are in full dress uniforms greeting everyone with "welcome to the White House." I think they purposely select good-looking people for these roles.

The first tree on display is the Gold Star Tree that honors the heroic men and women in the military who died for our country. There were too many gold stars, each had the name of someone who made the ultimate sacrifice. In that way, it reminded me of the Names Project quilts.

Too many lives lost too soon. I was on the mall when this display happened. I remember the excitement when the President and Mrs. Clinton walked onto the quilt display area.

Part of the fun in visiting the White House is going into the rooms that most of us only see on TV. The picture with Admiral Rachel Levine, our Assistant Secretary for Health, was taken in the State Dining Room. President Lincoln is looking over our shoulders. It fills my heart with so much LGBTQ pride. Not that long ago, neither of us would be welcomed into the White House. It is hard to describe what it means to stand with the four-star admiral in the Public Health Service who also brings her experience as a transgender pediatrician to the fight. This photo might make some people mad, but there are many more who will see it as a sign of hope. The genie is out of the bottle and we will never go back. Admiral Levine is a living example of how far we've come, but there is still a long way to go. NMAC looks forward to working with her office as the leader for HHS's efforts to end the epidemic.

I was also excited to meet Mayor Lori Lightfoot, the first Black Lesbian Mayor of Chicago. She was a good sport as I escorted/shoved her around the room to meet Dr. Fauci, Dr. Demetre Daskalakis (CDC), Dr. Stephen Lee (NASTAD) and Harold Phillips (White House). Only one person in the above photos is straight. How cool is that? I told the mayor that NMAC looks forward to coming to her city, maybe as soon as the Spring of 2022. If one of our Chicago constituents can forward her these pictures, I would appreciate it.

The main presentation was in the East Room of the White House. The symbolic nature of having a seat at the table was not lost on me. Like so many in our movement, I've spent my entire life fighting for health equity and racial justice as stepping stones to end the epidemic. There is no way this kid from Seattle could imagine sitting in the White House with world leaders. Yet there I was with my red jacket and sparkly shoes. In the world of blue and grey suits, I stood out like the flower that I am. Even at the White House, I refuse to confirm. Being a gay person of color is my badge of honor. It took me a long time to find the self-acceptance to love the Asian queen that I am. I make sure nobody mistakes me for being heterosexual. Not that being heterosexual is a bad thing, it's just not what I want to be.

There were many members of Congress in attendance. Our shero House Speaker Nancy Pelosi led the delegation that included Congressmembers Maxine "Auntie Max" Waters, Barbara Lee, Sean Patrick Maloney, David Cicilline, and Jenniffer Gonzalez-Colon. The President reminded attendees that Mrs. Pelosi came to Washington to fight AIDS. With her leadership, HIV continues to be prioritized by Congress. I met the Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico, Jenniffer Gonzalez-Colon and invited her to speak at the 2022 United States Conference on HIV/AIDS in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Members of Congress are key to HIV appropriations and funding our efforts to end the epidemic. I was so proud that we could honor Mrs. Pelosi at this year's USCHA.

When Harold Phillips, the head of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy (ONAP) walked into the East Room, the audience broke into spontaneous applause. It was a moment. Here was one of our own, a Black Gay man living with HIV who was in charge. I ran over to hug him as he whispered, "don't you make me cry." I said, "too late I am crying enough for both of us." The

official announcement started with HHS Secretary Becerra. He would introduce the person who would introduce the President. Remember, this is Washington and there are very strict protocols.

It is always a surprise to see who the White House selects to introduce the President. The individual chosen sends a message and the administration selected Gabriel Maldonado. As a Gay Latinx man living with HIV, Gabe is the Founder and CEO of TruEvolution in Riverside California. His selection highlighted the important role that community will play in this effort. Gabe did us proud. He not only shared his personal story, he also brought along his mom. You could see his pride when he acknowledged her from the stage. Then came the President.

President Biden did not disappoint. His speech was strong powerful and clear. Here is the full text of what he said. Not only did he commit his administration to ending the HIV epidemic by 2030, he also called out racism as a public health challenge. He went off teleprompter to invite Gabe's mother to the stage. This is a President who leads with empathy and bringing mom to the stage showed us his heart. He is a good man who is working under impossible conditions. His real gift was the bully pulpit of the White House. A key component to ending the epidemic is "political will." With this event, he put the force of his administration behind this effort. It is now up to all of us.

As I mentioned earlier, the White House is like Disneyland on steroids. As we walked out of the East Room, the military band played "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." We were then invited to have our photo taken in front of the two-story red ribbon. Here I am with Naseema Shafi (Whitman-Walker Health) and Kierra Johnson (National LGBTQ Task Force). As a parting gift, we received a copy of the President's World AIDS Day Proclamation.

This was history and I wanted all of you to be there. I hope this piece expresses my excitement, not because I got to go, but because the White House is committed to ending the HIV epidemic. This event was an important signal from the people in power. They are committed to ending the epidemic by working with community. Now the real work begins, and it is going to take all of us!

Yours in the struggle,

Paul Kawata

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