

World AIDS Day notebook

ACT UP keeps the pressure cooking on the Clintons to follow through with campaign promises regarding AIDS

by Bob Roehr

Hillary Clinton's face dropped slack-jawed. She seemed to mouth the words "Oh shit," as she sat in the limousine parked outside the Holocaust Museum. Peering out, she had seen a smiling face and a sign reading "Silence = Death."

It was like Scrooge recognizing the vision of Marley. In this case Wayne Turner was the "ghost" of AIDS past, one of the ACT UP stalwarts who had dogged the Clintons last year on the campaign trail.

ACT UP Washington was playing the role of conscience amidst the Clinton administration's massive public relations blitz on World AIDS Day. It was reminding the powerful and isolated that their actions to date are but window dressing, that the specter of AIDS has a human face. The specter would appear again and again at virtually every event in Washington that the administration had organized.

Donna Shalala, Secretary of Health and Human Services, announced on Nov. 30 the Clinton administration's major new initiative to fighting AIDS. It is a 15-member National Task Force on AIDS Drug Development "to identify and remove any barriers or obstacles to developing effective treatments."

Shalala's speech was interrupted by ACT UP member Wayne Turner who called the task force just "smoke and mirrors." He demanded a crash research program to find a cure for AIDS.

Bill Freeman, executive director of the National Association of People with AIDS, has been working with Shalala's office to create the task force. His response was tempered. "Any time the voices of people living with HIV/AIDS are brought forward in a formal way by our government, we totally support that. However, what we need is an implementation plan and strategy. We know what needs to be done. Now we need the will and the commitment to take action."

The centerpiece of the Clinton administration's World AIDS Day activities was the President's visit with AIDS patients and a speech at Georgetown University Hospital. Clinton was interrupted by activist Luke Sissyfag who shouted, "One year, lots of talk, no action."

Clinton tried to calm the situation as Sissyfag was escorted out of the room. He defended his administration, citing a 20 percent increase in spending on HIV/AIDS research and a 66 percent

increase in funding for services under the Ryan White Act in a period of general budget austerity.

Toward the end of the day one man had had enough of ACT UP's disruptions. He was Victor Zonana, award-winning former AIDS reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* and founder of the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association. He is now the openly gay deputy assistant secretary for public affairs with the Department of Health and Human Services.

Zonana stood at the door of the HHS building, a red ribbon on his lapel, and when a handful of ACT UP members tried to enter to attend the HHS AIDS commemoration, he ordered them thrown out.

Cheryl Spector had come to see if her brother's panel was part of The AIDS Quilt panels on display for the ceremony. She looked Zonana in the face and asked, "How can you do this?" His response was that it was a closed event for federal employees.

The small group turned to leave, chanting "ACT UP, fight back, fight AIDS." But evidently it wasn't quickly enough, as two people ended up pushed to the pavement by zealous security guards.

Zonana later said in a conversation, "It was clear that they [the people he identified as being with ACT UP] were there to disrupt the ceremony" and that the "ceremony organizers didn't want the disruption." Curiously enough, even though Zonana was adamant about blocking the presumed protesters, he also minimized their impact saying "the other two things were one guy." He

remarked, "the sophisticated AIDS treatment activists and the sophisticated AIDS service activists are at the table right now."

Spector was irate. "All of them standing there with their big red ribbons on, kicking us out, I was furious," she said, "There is something very wrong with that picture."

Thursday morning, the day after World AIDS Day, the phone and fax lines into the ACT UP office were dead. The telephone company said it was because they couldn't read Steve Michael's signature on the payment check. They didn't say that Michael's standard illegible signature would keep the check from clearing. The phones were back on by 2 pm.

Michael said the interruption of service really hampered their ability to reach the media and affect their "spin" on the previous day's activities. He couldn't help but speculate that perhaps the phone problems were not just a coincidence, that someone was trying to "jerk them around."

One member of Gebbie's staff sought out Turner that evening at a bar. During an extended conversation he said that most of the staff were highly supportive of ACT UP's actions that day because they kept public pressure on the administration. That strengthened the hand of AIDS advocates within the administration in their internal fight with others who were less supportive, he observed.

Walter Broadnax addresses federal employees on World AIDS Day



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