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Phil Donahue, The Donahue Show, December, 1992

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national news

Hopeful horde

Poll results, a staunch gay Republican politician, and an HIV-positive Republican housewife-turned-AIDS-advocate set the tone at an HRCF conference

by Bob Roehr

The tone was decidedly more Republican and surprisingly upbeat as 300 members of the Human Rights Campaign Fund came to Washington, D.C., the first weekend in March for the second annual Randy Klose Gay and Lesbian Leadership Conference.

The plenary session on Sunday focused on AIDS. Separate break-out sessions dealt with organizational nuts and bolts, briefings on specific issues, and lobbying, most in preparation for Monday when attendees spread out across Capitol Hill for meetings with their members of Congress.

First up on Sunday were the consultants. Newly hired Republicans Wilma Goldstein and David Sackett joined Democratic veteran Celinda Lake to discuss the joint survey of 800 voters they took Feb. 25 and 26.

It showed 77 percent of those surveyed favor maintaining or increasing AIDS funding, while only 15 percent support a reduction. A majority, 56 percent, said they would be less likely to support a member of Congress who voted for cuts.

"There is very little credibility for almost any federal program, with one exception," Sackett reported. "I am glad to say—and I was frankly a little surprised and a little pleased to see—that one exception was AIDS research.

"It is an issue that goes beyond the gay and lesbian issue. It goes beyond pure health care. It is a national crisis. And it is one of the few issues in the country where people think that the delivery of services is actually effective and is doing something for the problem.

"This is now a crisis which exists in every demographic group and every region in the country. It is as real and as concerning to a fundamentalist Christian mother of three children in Boise, Idaho, as it is to a young gay male in New York City," Sackett said.

The polling data became a crucial element in successfully lobbying the House Appropriations Committee not to cut funding for AIDS. Two conservatives who had voted for cuts in the subcommittee, Jim Istook of Oklahoma and Jay Dickey of Arkansas, reversed themselves and joined with a majority of Republicans to support the appropriation in the full committee.

"Talk about a good investment," said HRCF's chief lobbyist Daniel Zingale. "Over \$30 million in AIDS funding off of this one poll."

Next up was Steve Gunderson, the gay representative from Wisconsin. "I'm a Republican," he said. "I don't want any criticism from those of you who belong to the party of Sam Nunn about that."

The crowd warmed to the self-described "vertically challenged" Gunderson as he recounted some of the turmoil his sexuality has brought to his public life over the last few years: his being the target of "a vicious right-wing primary," being "personally attacked on the floor of the House," and being "the target of physical and verbal assaults, even death threats, from the radical gay community."

He went on to explain the new political environment—the "anti-Washington Congress elected

in November 1994."

"We literally spend 100 times each year in interest on the national debt" what we spend on AIDS programs, Gunderson said. "You don't have to like the fact that we are on a seven-year track to a balanced budget, but you have to understand it.

"It is essential that you realize and comprehend this: Anti-government does not mean anti-gay. The House Republican leadership, to their credit, went to great pains in writing the 'Contract with America' and they did not include any of the social issues."

The representative played "a very prominent role" in persuading colleagues to support AIDS funding in recent Appropriations Committee votes, noted HRCF board member Ritch Colbert in his introduction of Gunderson. It was "an unusual role for somebody off the committee to play."

"I can assure you that the Ryan White Act will be reauthorized," Gunderson said, citing conversations with all of the key players in that process.

He warned there will be a fight over the formula for distributing money, saying it can't be avoided. He compared Wisconsin and Colorado, which have similar AIDS caseloads. "But, under the existing formula, Colorado receives \$6 million more a year than the state of Wisconsin," he said.

Regarding civil rights, Gunderson said he thought it likely that amendments discriminatory to gay men and lesbians would be proposed on the floor of the House of Representatives under the open rules of that body. He anticipated that some might pass. But he guaranteed that "there will never be a hostile amendment that is offered as party policy."

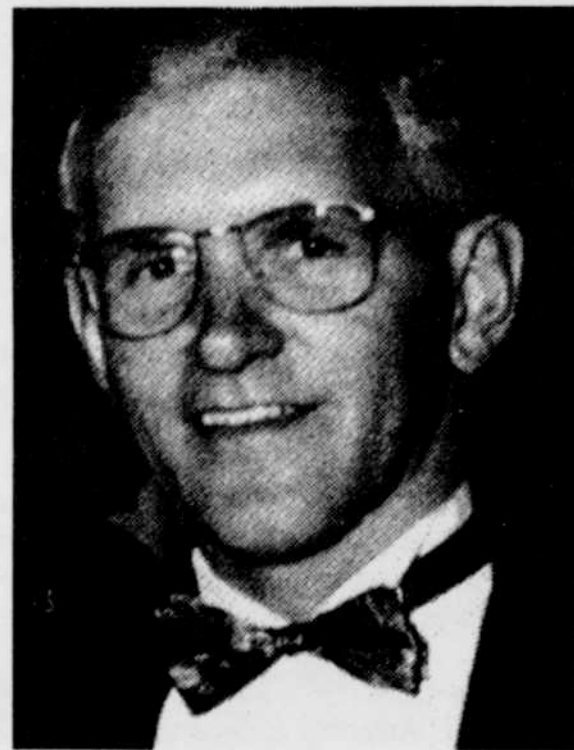
The plenary session ended with a moral force. Mary Fisher spoke with the same clarity, the same intensity, that she brought for one shining moment to the vitriolic 1992 Republican National Convention. Fisher is a Republican housewife from Michigan who became an advocate for people with AIDS after having tested HIV positive herself. The audience sat transfixed, in awed silence, as she spoke of "an AIDS community hungry for leadership. On the Hill we are like the Jewish children of Auschwitz stealing each other's bread."

She noted organizations campaigning "for their membership's share of the pie and the good of their careers."

"We need those who are willing to argue for what is just, what is true, what is compassionate, what is right. We need leaders willing to lead from a platform built on planks because they are right—not merely because they will work in the short run.... And we need the leadership to come, in large measure, from the uninfected community."

"Compassion appears to be fading as the epidemic is growing," Fisher said, adding that she came to the gay and lesbian community "to ask that you not slip away. Don't leave now just because you are weary. We need you desperately.

"If those of us who are well are not responsible for caring for those who are sick, who is?"



Steve Gunderson