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national news

Trail mix

Steve Michael, the AIDS candidate for president, blends a street activist's passion with insider know-how

by Bob Roehr

AIDS needs a presidential candidate. The issue needs to be part of the election debate," says Steve Michael. He is offering himself up as that candidate, challenging President Clinton in the Democratic primary.

Michael, 39, is the personification of ACT UP Washington: equally comfortable in the muscle T-shirts and boots of a street activist or the tailored suits of a lobbyist.

He comes well prepared for the effort. He was part of the ACT UP "Presidential Project" which dogged candidates on the campaign trail in 1992 to raise the issue of AIDS. And in his home state of Washington, he challenged George Bush's re-election on the primary ballot.

He moved to the nation's Capitol after election day, continuing his work to keep AIDS before the public eye. He uses a mix of street tactics and insider politics. They range from early disruptions of Clinton's public appearances on AIDS and the organized protest outside the December White House Conference on HIV/AIDS, to work with the Single Payer Coalition during the debate over health care reform and an appearance on CNN opposite Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala on World AIDS Day. Last year Mayor Marion Barry appointed him to the Ryan White Planning Council for AIDS services.

Many in the community, both locally and nationally, have mixed feelings toward Michael—often simultaneously. All acknowledge that he is smart, dedicated and often effective. But, as with most strong personalities, he also can be abrasive and "unmanageable."

Now Michael and a few close supporters have joined the migration of presidential candidates to snowy New Hampshire seeking votes door to door and through the media.

Don Sundquist has switched his registration from Independent to Democrat to lead Michael's slate of delegates on the ballot in the Granite State. Sundquist was recently tried and convicted for setting up a local needle exchange program to help stem the spread of HIV infection.

Campaign chairman Wayne Turner tells the story of walking up to a woman with a pro-choice bumper sticker on her car and saying, "That's Steve Michael, he's my lover, he's running for president against Bill Clinton on Clinton's AIDS programs."

And she looked at him and said, "Finally, someone I can vote for."

"Liberals have nowhere to go," offers Turner. As few as 3,500 votes could win them delegates to the Democratic National Convention from New Hampshire.

"It's not about winning, it's about AIDS," says Michael. "People understand that this election campaign isn't about me, it's about the presidency and the importance of the presidency on developing AIDS policy and the leadership question."

One way Michael wants to get the message out

is by running honest, effective education and prevention ads that government agencies have been afraid to create and television stations afraid to run. He has thought of adding the tag line: "If this ad were not done by a presidential candidate, you wouldn't be seeing it. Vital life-saving information is being censored."

As a presidential candidate, Michael's ads will run uncensored, at the lowest possible rate. He knows they will create controversy, and thus free news coverage, further leveraging their effect.

The crown jewel of the media forum he seeks for AIDS is the Democratic National Convention. By party rules, 300 delegate signatures on a nominating petition brings the candidate 20 minutes of prime time at the convention and 20 minutes of AIDS coverage on network television.

Michael realizes he probably isn't going to win all of those at the ballot box. He points out that any delegate can sign the petition—they don't have to be pledged to him.

"You go to New York, are you going to tell me that [Manhattan Rep.] Gerald Nadler is going to refuse to give AIDS nominating time on the floor of the convention?"

"You go to the most liberal members of Congress and they are going to have to make a choice: making the president mad, or making people with AIDS in their district mad."



Steve Michael

PHOTO BY BOB ROEHR

President Jimmy Carter faced a similar choice in 1980. The gay caucus put forward Melvin Boozer as a vice presidential nominee to help bring visibility to their issues. The caucus was able to gather the necessary signatures, probably with the acquiescence of the Carter campaign. But Boozer's speech was scheduled during the network news. Party rules have been changed to prevent such a situation from recurring.

Money is the mother's milk of politics. Michael hopes to qualify for matching federal campaign funds by raising a minimum of \$5,000 in 20 different states. The first \$250 of any individual contribution counts toward that goal.

But he has to raise his share of the money first. He grumbles about the national organizations and their lack of support.

"I'd like the money the Human Rights Campaign is going to spend on that Candace Gingrich tour. She was in Manchester; she didn't affect anything."

Michael says that in places like New Hampshire, "People aren't willing to show at a gay event because that is outing them."

It's a long road to the national convention in August. You are going to be hearing a lot more of Steve Michael as he travels that road.

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