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national news

A challenging role

Incoming ONAP director Sandra Thurman may have Clinton's ear, but she's playing to a tough crowd

by Bob Roehr

President Clinton named Sandra L. Thurman his third director of the Office of National AIDS Policy at a brief White House ceremony on April 7. "My door is open to her," pledged the president of his new AIDS czar.

Thurman is an Atlanta native who built AID Atlanta into a major AIDS service organization during her tenure there as executive director from 1988 to 1993. She has been a member of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS since its inception two years ago.

Thurman has also been very active in Democratic politics. She took a leave of absence from her job in 1992 to run the crucial Georgia primary campaign for Clinton and worked on the 1996 presidential campaign, at the Democratic National Convention and on the inaugural committee.

Thurman is an Atlanta native who built AID Atlanta into a major AIDS service organization during her tenure there as executive director from 1988 to 1993.

"She understands the inner workings of the White House, she understands how those people think." Daniel Zingale, executive director of the AIDS Action Council, saw the appointment as "an important step." But he added, "Much more remains to be done. [The appointment needs to be] followed by a significant investment in staff and budget resources to wage our nation's war against HIV."

Kerry Lobel, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, called on Thurman and the administration "to work with Congress to lift the ban on the use of federal funds for needle-exchange programs; oppose House Resolution 1062 [the Coburn bill], that would require states to adopt mandatory HIV testing; and work for full funding for AIDS research, prevention, health care and housing initiatives."

Bruce Reed, assistant to the president on domestic policy, said that "for the first time" the ONAP director will have an office "within the White House complex," although that is likely to be just Thurman and not her staff. Acting director Eric Goosby will stay on as her deputy while also retaining his position at the Department of Health and Human Services. It is unclear whether staff and budget for the office will increase.

Reaction to the Thurman appointment was generally, but not universally, favorable.

Brian Bond, executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, knows Thurman from working with her on the 1996 re-election campaign. "I think she will be extremely effective," he said.

Steve Michael, of ACT UP Washington, criticized Thurman as "the third in a series of ineffective, no-name bureaucrats filling the AIDS czar position." He said she was "ousted" from her position with AID Atlanta over "increasing scrutiny over her clothing allowance and high salary."

That brought a tart denial from AID Atlanta. Board chair Ken Britt recounted how under Thurman's tenure the organization and budget grew from 13 to 90 employees. Her salary rose from \$35,000 to \$68,000. "Although she was reimbursed for a few expenses, Sandy had no travel budget, no car allowance, not even a budget for out-of-town meals."

In appreciation of an independent thinker

Marvin Liebman, 73, died of heart disease in Washington, D.C., on March 31. He was best known to the gay and lesbian community through his 1992 autobiography *Coming Out Conservative* and a subsequent column which ran in many gay newspapers. Above all else he espoused principled common sense.

Liebman lived much of his life in the closet, coming out publicly only at the age of 67. His political journey was even more dramatic: He started as an activist with the Young Communist League, was discharged from the Army during World War II for homosexuality, fought with the militant group Irgun to establish the state of Israel.

He was befriended by William F. Buckley in the 1950s, beginning his long service to conservative organizations and to the political campaigns of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan. He pioneered many of the fund-raising and direct-mail techniques that have become standard practice in political and issue campaigns.

Liebman lay his coming out in part to rising homophobia among the far right. As he wrote in

his autobiography, he began to feel "like a Jew in Germany in 1934 who had chosen to remain silent, hoping to be able to stay invisible as he watched the beginning of the Holocaust."

I had the good fortune of knowing Marvin in his later years. He was a remarkable man on several counts, perhaps none more so than his open, positive and friendly manner. He treated all people with respect, enjoyed talking with them and valued their opinions whether he agreed with them or not.

He inspired fierce loyalty across a broad spectrum of views. A few years back, activists Michael Petrelis and Michaelangelo Signorile sat on the same couch in Marvin's apartment with the very conservative Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R-California). It was a birthday party for their host. He attracted a bevy of young men who valued his wisdom, his experience and the way he discussed things without condescension. It was mentoring in the best sense of the word.

Marvin Liebman's life was filled with passion for causes, yet he never lost sight that underneath the cause we are all human beings. He will be missed.



Marvin Liebman

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