

NORTHWESTnews

A gay Portlander was among 26 people appointed to the 35-member Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS in January. The only problem: Nobody knows who he is.

The Log Cabin Republicans described James P. Driscoll as a "longtime AIDS activist." But Thomas Bruner, Cascade AIDS Project executive director, told *Just Out* he never has met, done business with or heard of him during his three years in Oregon or his 15 years in HIV work.

The mystery comes at a time when critics are accusing President Bush of stacking the council with unqualified campaign contributors and other people with little or no background in HIV/AIDS public policy or science. Most of the attacks are aimed at the co-chairman, former U.S. Rep. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., who once called for the firing of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director because the agency promotes condom use.

Bush—whose budget reflects a \$33 million increase over 2002 to fund abstinence-only education—also selected several people who oppose safe-sex practices. Among them were Rashida Jolley, 2000 Miss District of Columbia, and Dandrick Moton, a 25-year-old whose background in HIV/AIDS policy consists of traveling with his mother as dual motivational speakers encouraging kids to save themselves until marriage.

Maureen S. O'Leary, Gay and Lesbian Medical Association executive director, says this approach further will marginalize at-risk queer and questioning youth. "The program emphasizes abstinence until marriage when marriage for them is not relevant."

Adding to the controversy was Secretary of State Colin Powell's appearance Feb. 14 on MTV in which he expressed support for condom use. The anti-gay Family Research Council immediately slammed his "reckless" remarks and demanded presidential punishment.

Meanwhile, Powell found an unlikely ally in Chad Johnson, National Stonewall Democrats executive director. He made light of the mixed messages coming out of the White House.

"I would trade Secretary Powell for most of Bush's new appointees to the presidential AIDS council," Johnson says. "It appears that he, unlike the majority of the council, understands that ignorance does not effectively protect against HIV transmission."

GOOD ADVICE?

President Bush appoints gay Portlander to embattled HIV/AIDS panel

by Jim Radosta



James P. Driscoll says the AIDS epidemic in Africa, if ignored, will have "major" geopolitical consequences

So who is Jim Driscoll? After multiple calls to the White House and Log Cabin Republicans, *Just Out* finally was able to contact the 55-year-old—and it turns out he's an outspoken critic of the abstinence-only approach.

"While I'm an Oregon voter and resident there, I've never really been involved in the Oregon AIDS scene," he says, explaining his low profile. "So in some sense I'm sort of an outsider."

Driscoll was born in Neosho, Mo., and moved to Oregon when he was 3. He graduated from Tigard High School; studied philosophy at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash.; and earned a Ph.D. in English from University of Wisconsin in Madison.

He has worked as a real estate investor and has written books applying Jungian psychology to literary criticism of William Shakespeare and John Milton. But how does this make him qualified to serve on a national HIV/AIDS advisory panel?

Driscoll didn't become an activist until the late 1980s. He was living in San Francisco, and two of his closest friends had AIDS.

"I remember what the Castro was like at that time—how dreadful it was to be where so many people were getting sick and dying or

had just disappeared," he says. "It was like driving around a cemetery."

Driscoll got involved in ACT UP and began writing newspaper opinion pieces attacking the Food and Drug Administration's slow approval process. He also formed coalitions with cancer and Alzheimer's disease patients who felt the same way.

A big dispute concerning protease inhibitors divided the AIDS community in 1996. Driscoll opposed "extremely consumer protectionist" activists who wished to conduct more thorough testing, and "obviously our side won."

"Protease inhibitors came out faster than virtually any drugs have come out since, I think, penicillin," he says. "As soon as they came out, the death rate began to drop dramatically...about 75 percent overall."

In 1997, legislation finally passed to reform the FDA. "I was, I think, one of the leading people in the AIDS community pushing for that," Driscoll says.

He spent the next few years lobbying on behalf of Log Cabin to increase funding for the AIDS Drug Assistance Program, which helps patients who don't have private insurance and are not on Medicaid. "This program is particularly appealing to Republicans because it enables patients to continue on the job, paying taxes, being self-sufficient without having to go on welfare to get drugs."

Driscoll says he left Log Cabin during the spring of 2000 when a "significant split" arose with supporters of U.S. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz. "I sided with the Bush people, and that sort of led to the agreement that we would be terminating our relationship at the end of the year."

He now works as federal affairs adviser for the National AIDS Treatment Advocacy Project, which focuses on education along the East Coast. He also has been involved during the past year with the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, the largest provider of treatment in the United States.

Driscoll especially is interested in efforts to

address the international epidemic. He spent a month in South Africa last Christmas and describes the "utterly horrendous situation" in some areas where the HIV infection rate for people between 18 and 45 is at 40 percent.

"It's like...the Castro district was in the 1980s," he says. "And they're faced with something much worse, because they can't get treatment."

Driscoll says U.S. indifference will hurt race relations and predicts the ultimate geopolitical consequences here will be "major"—even worse than terrorism. "When South Africa implodes—which many people think it will as a result of just tremendous numbers of deaths that are coming in five to 10 years—it's going to have really negative implications for the whole of Africa, which of course faces the same problem as South Africa."

Driscoll says the council did not convene in 2001 because the disputed 2000 election slowed down the appointment process. It will come together three or four times this year, with the first meeting scheduled for March 14 and 15.

He admits some of the appointments were controversial but thinks they potentially have "a lot of clout. It's not like a milquetoast sort of council which won't offend anybody but also won't be able to do anything."

Driscoll says if they address concerns such as HIV/hepatitis C coinfection—a huge problem in the African American and Hispanic communities—"the administration will have to listen." He also doubts the abstinence-only argument is going to succeed.

"The council is not going to come out with a position that abstinence is the only type of prevention," he says. "Abstinence is...if it can be practiced...a highly effective prevention strategy...but that's not the only approach that we

should be using for prevention."

Driscoll, who is single, moved back to Portland three years ago. But because of his busy schedule and the increased difficulty of flying, he now spends most of his time residing in Alexandria, Va.

As a gay Republican, he sees the party becoming more inclusive of gay appointees but wishes things would speed up. "At this stage, you have to go slowly and carefully so that you don't deliberately or inadvertently antagonize the right, because that could be counterproductive." □

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—James P. Driscoll

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