A Visit to “The Other City”

September 21, 2010 By Kate Ferguson

When I first heard that a movie about HIV/AIDS in DC had opened in NYC theaters, I wondered how people would respond. Honestly, I didn’t expect a crowd--couldn’t see it. At a time when the economy is itself in recovery, and so many people still hurting, I simply didn’t think folks would want to see a film about people living with HIV/AIDS in our nation’s capital, or anywhere else for that matter.

Sure enough, when I walked into Chelsea’s Clearview Cinema, theater 5 was empty. Although I’d predicted a quiet night alone at the movies, as I watched the trailers for coming attractions, I caught myself glancing around. Was no one else attending? Cynical New York transplanted that I am, I still wondered…did no one care?

Then a man strolled into the theater. He sat up front in one of the side rows. Almost immediately he whipped out a cell phone. Maybe he’s calling friends to tell them that no one was in the theater, I thought. I also wondered what he thought about all those empty seats. Was he dismayed? Did he think people were apathetic?

But then again, I had to be fair. I’d never heard of this movie. I’d seen no commercials, no billboards hyping the show. People probably just didn’t know about it. I was sure it was a limited engagement flick, for select audiences only. (Translation: People who already know about HIV or who are affected by it either directly or indirectly.) Then the trailers ended.

As I settled down to watch the main attraction, I soon found myself engrossed in the stories of several HIV-positive people. They represented a cross-section of urban Americans you could find in Any City, USA. Their faces and stories, reminded me of people I knew or had met at one time or another in my life.

Then it hit me. These were “invisible” people living in an “invisible” world in one of the world’s most visible cities. You’d think that in the capital of the United States of America, where the legislators are just a short limo ride away, people in need wouldn’t have to scrounge for housing, meds to keep them alive and funding to keep the agencies going that helped keep them going.

As the movie continued, I found myself wondering about a country where our democratic government makes claims saying it’s the best the world has to offer. But if this is the best the world has to offer, it’s not saying much about America’s capabilities--at least not in the area of human compassion, kindness and effective and supportive governance of its citizens’ health.

It’s been said that a civilized nation is measured by the amount of care and concern it shows for its people. But by that standard, America does not qualify. If it did, there would be no “other” city within cities.

When the film ended, I was alone in theater 5. (My movie companion had deserted his seat about 10 minutes before the credits rolled.) Although I thought the film was predictably downbeat and an honest reflection of what's experienced by so many people living with HIV/AIDS, there were heartwarming, hopeful moments that illuminated the gloom.

I marveled at the the HIV-positive single mom rushing around, pounding the pavements and exploring every avenue just to secure a place on a several-years-long housing waiting list; the reformed drug addict turned HIV/AIDS advocate dispensing clean needles wherever and whenever with a kind word to give hope to many others consider hopeless; the gay Latino young man canvassing DC parks to offer condoms and cautionary advice to other young men and women of his age; and the older man prepared to reclaim his independence away from the love and security of his AIDS service organization caregivers. Would he make it on his own?

These stories about the ability of people to rise above their economic circumstances and compromised immune systems to just deal with life were incredibly inspiring. I left theater 5 feeling energized.

The one thing I regretted? That The Other City isn't required viewing for the legislators on Capitol Hill. Would that make a difference in the way America handles its HIV/AIDS crisis?

Well, I can hope, can't I?

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