Let’s Start the End-Game This World AIDS Day!

December 1, 2011 By Phill Wilson

Who would have thought a strange new disease first identified among five gay men at UCLA medical center in 1981 would become the health issue of our time, killing more than 25 million people so far and threatening to destabilize countries around the globe?

I used to have a wall in my house with photos of all my friends who had died from AIDS. A whole wall of pictures of people I knew and loved who had died from AIDS, including my first partner, Chris Brownlie.

I also used to have one of those little black books for telephone numbers. You remember, before smart phones. We used to actually write telephone numbers down in a book with a pen--or a pencil, if he was shady.

When one of my friends would die, I would put the date and a number by his name, and yes until Novella Dudley and Belynda Dunn, it *was* **his** name. I stopped counting at 250. That was 1990.

I’m not alone. I know a lot of people who lost as many as me. But whether it was two hundred and fifty, one hundred, ten or only one, each, and every one of us is a living panel on the AIDS quilt of the epidemic.

We Are The Ones We’ve Been Waiting For

Can you imagine a day when the red ribbon is an artifact of the war on AIDS--a time when HIV is a distant memory, like smallpox or something?

Last year--nearly three decades into the epidemic--President Obama released the first National HIV/AIDS Strategy for the United States. We have a national strategy today because some of the people who are reading this article believed that it was important to have a national strategy. Some of us challenged the presidential candidates in 2008, and some of us made sure the President kept his promise.

Let’s not get it twiste; everything that has happened in the fight against HIV/AIDS has happened because people like us made it happen.

On Thursday, the President is giving a big AIDS speech. I hope he recites the vision of the National HIV/AIDS Strategy.

“The United States will become a place where new HIV infections are rare and when they do occur, every person, regardless of age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or socio-economic

circumstance, will have unfettered access to high quality, life-extending care, free from stigma and discrimination."

That's an amazing promise.

In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and challenged America to make good on a promissory note signed by Abraham Lincoln 100 years earlier. We cannot wait 100 years to make good on the vision of the National HIV/AIDS Strategy. It's time to end the AIDS epidemic in America. Thirty years is enough.

We are at a deciding moment. We have the tools to end the AIDS epidemic in America. We can do more than imagine the end of the epidemic: We can make it happen. We have new diagnostic tools, new surveillance capabilities, new prevention strategies, new treatment options, and a new understanding of how to interrupt acquisition and transmission. The question is no longer can we end AIDS? The question is: Do we have the moral will and the political leadership to do it. Will we use these newly acquired and in some cases primitive tools efficiently, compassionately and effectively?

As President Obama has stated before, "The question is not whether we know what to do, but whether we will do it."

I have reoccurring nightmare. There is a little boy asking a wise old man, "What did you do during the plague years? What did you do when millions of people were dying from AIDS?" I always wake up before the wise old man has a chance to answer. I'm afraid I wake up because I'm afraid of the answer. I'm afraid the answer will be, "Not enough."

I don't know what the President is going to say on Thursday. But I do know what I would like for him to say. I know what 1.2 million Americans living with HIV/AIDS need him to say: We need him to say that our country does have the moral will end the AIDS epidemic. And we need our President to demonstrate the political leadership to get the job done.

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