

## To the Whole Church on World AIDS Day 2007

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My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Twenty years ago this month, I was a bright eyed 21 year old gay “boy” who was alive and excited about life. I was volunteering for the local AIDS project back home in New Haven- working to get “safer sex” information out to my peers. I had just finished EMT school, and was working in a profession that I loved. I was fair haired, fair skinned, an out of the closet man in uniform, who after long last could go into the gay bars in town. Life was colorful, vibrant and alive.

I was dating a guy who I liked, and he and I, along with some other friends, decided to go to Washington, DC for a weekend to see the AIDS Quilt, and just be young, gay, and on a road trip to our Nation’s Capitol. None of us had been to Washington before, so we were expecting streets lined with cherry trees, grand marble edifices and flags; triumphant salutations to all the wonder, freedom, and safety our Nation represented to us. The promises of prior generations fulfilled- we were the benefactors to the sacrifices these marble testaments represented.

The AIDS epidemic for my friends and I was an abstract concept. Sure, we knew people who were HIV+ through volunteering at the AIDS Project, but they were not like us. We were young, white, smart, and affluent, and AIDS doesn’t happen to people like us. I knew I would never get HIV because I was a highly trained medical “professional,” and knew how to protect myself. AIDS would never affect me or my friends.

We knew that those who got AIDS were the older guys; the “ferns”; guys in the porn theatre on Woodward Avenue, in East Rock Park, and down at Long Wharf. Junkies and prostitutes we were not, so we would be ok.

We were invincible.

Our visit to the AIDS quilt began to change that in all of us.

We discovered that people who died of AIDS were affluent, white, smart, college educated. They were, and continue to be, artists, doctors, lawyers, and even EMT’s. They are men, women, gay and straight. They were black and white, mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles. The fabric of the AIDS Quilt represented, in a very real way, the fabric of humanity. Cut from different swatches and bolts, they were sewn together to become a seamless fabric.

Then AIDS hit home.

About 3 weeks after our trip, one of my group of friends tested positive for HIV. There we all were – facing this disease straight in the face. Our friend who was college educated, white, and employed, was HIV+. His health insurance didn’t cover his HIV meds, so we each chipped in every month to cover his medication bill, which was \$500 a month.

The party was over for this 21 year old.

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At 21, I was facing the disease, and watching a friend die – very quickly, and there was nothing I could do. I saved lives every day in my job. Shootings, heart attacks, strokes, diabetic comas – I overcame them all. But not this- I could honestly say there were people alive purely because of my skill and intervention, but I could do nothing for my friend. I felt more helpless then than I ever had at that point in my life.

I couldn't even escape it in my job. One day, I was called upon to transport a man to Hospice. Turned out, it was a school-mate – we graduated from high school together. He was dying, and I was taking him to the last place he will ever live. He looked at me in the back of the ambulance, told me not touch him, as he didn't want to make me sick. I stroked his hair, held his hand, and we both cried the entire ride. He died 3 days later – he was 22. To this day, I can close my eyes, and see his tears – and his pulling away from me as I tried to wipe them from his cheeks because he wanted to protect me.

About a year or so later, I recall my mom commenting to me that I went to a lot of wakes and funerals. It was true. My friend from the trip to DC had passed away 11 months after his diagnosis. I watched the gay community slip away and die; emaciated not only by the disease, but by prejudice, apathy, and neglect.

I fell in love with Washington, DC on that trip in 1987, and knew then that one day, I would make my home here, something I accomplished in 1999.

So – fast forward from 1987 to 2007. I am not as fair haired or fair skinned. My uniform has changed, and it takes me a bit longer to be “vibrant.” Most certainly, the moniker “boy” no longer applies.

I have very close friends who are HIV+ and living with AIDS. My adopted home town of Washington, DC has the highest HIV infection rate of any city in the United States, so knowing someone who is HIV+ or living with AIDS is commonplace.

And today, I ask myself, where is the quilt?

The generation behind mine has that same invincible attitude that I had at 21, when I thought that HIV and AIDS was a diseases confined to the ‘lesser’. Now, the 20 something's aren't so concerned it seems with getting infected. I have heard more than once, *“getting HIV is like being diabetic- you can manage it- it's no longer a death sentence.”* We have terms in our vocabulary like *“bug chaser,” “bug parties,”* and *barebacking*. These same people would no sooner run out and voluntarily contract cancer, asthma, or diabetes, but they are actively searching for people to infect them with HIV. This self destructive behavior saddens me.

Where is the quilt?

Each panel of the AIDS Quilt is decorated to represent the person memorialized. Quite on purpose, each panel of the AIDS Quilt is cut to the length and width of a casket.

For me and my friends, the quilt transmitted a message.

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It was an amazing thing to see all these casket length quilt panels covering the grounds of our Nation's Capitol. It took every inch of grass between the White House and the Washington Monument to display them all. I understand that there are so many panels now, that you cannot display them all in one place anymore.

I remember looking at the White House while viewing the quilt, and the drapes were drawn. I thought it odd- and I realized sometime later that it was a metaphoric moment- representing how the Regan administration treated the disease and those afflicted. Most certainly, 20 years later, those drapes are drawn yet again by an administration that feels AIDS is relegated to the 'lesser'- and to those 'deserving.'

The newer generation needs a quilt experience. HIV and AIDS has become an abstract to those in their 20's and younger, just as it was when I was 21.

In this **Chris-Crocker-I-am-invincible generation**- a generation that moves so quickly down their path that they miss the beauty of life, how do we get the message of the Quilt to them? How do we slow them down long enough to recognize their inner and outer beauty, and that their responsibility is to not live in the moment, but to protect that beauty given to them by God?

I wish I knew.

Perhaps they need to see the Quilt. Beautiful, majestic, and quiet. Both ominous and warm in what it manages to simultaneously represent- death and love.

Perhaps they all need to have an ambulance experience. To look down on that stretcher, and see themselves looking back up, might just get their attention before it's too late. I know it saved me... perhaps it will save them.

In the summer of 1999, I gave a speech to the 500 volunteers who were working on the AIDS Ride, of which I was a director. Of those 500 people, there were two who are still very important to me, my good friend and former partner, and my next youngest brother. It was an inspirational speech, most of which I don't remember. I do remember the end of it. I ended by saying, "I hope that someday, my younger brothers and my partner will know a world that has overcome AIDS."

I still have that hope- but it is for the younger generations- most especially my nieces Samantha and Jessica.

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The Most Reverend Michael V. Seneco, SPSA, DD, L.Th.  
Presiding Bishop