

HOUSING WORKS, SHELTER KILLS!

**An Oral History of Housing Works According to Keith Cylar and Charles King
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While first and foremost an oral history of a radical social service/social movement organization, "Housing Works, Shelter Kills!" is also the story of a broad impulse in AIDS and human rights activism. Housing Works was founded in 1990 to house a socially vulnerable population of homeless active drug users with AIDS – those usually turned away from other housing programs. Today, it is the nation's largest minority controlled AIDS service organization. The success of Housing Works can be attributed to an approach to social services built on combinations of fierce advocacy, client centered clinical care, rambunctious engagement, and community building. Through their re-invention of the Ghandian/U.S. Civil Rights repertoire of non-violent civil disobedience, Housing Works helped pave the way for the acceptance of harm reduction as a best practice approach to AIDS service delivery in the U.S.

Keith Cylar and Charles King were not the only founders of Housing Works, the nation's largest—and certainly most militant—minority-controlled AIDS service organization. (Attorney Virginia Shubert and ACT UP co-founder Eric Sawyer were also instrumental in starting the group). Yet over the years since the group was born out of the Housing Committee of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in 1990, Cylar and King came to embody Housing Works' belief in using direct action to "get the goods" for a population the rest of the world would rather have ignored: homeless, active drug users with HIV/AIDS.

Cylar, a gay African-American social worker and drug user, was the perfect counterbalance for King, a gay white southern minister who attended Yale's divinity and law schools, became the first (and only) white man to be ordained within the Connecticut Missionary Baptist Convention, and left his last parish when he refused to conceal his sexuality in the face of a looming AIDS catastrophe.

"*Silence Equals Death*" was ACT UP's warning to the world. Cylar and King were active members during the group's most active early years from 1987 through the early 1990's. Neither Cylar nor King could be silent about the fate of homeless people with HIV/AIDS. When ACT UP could not provide the advocacy and services necessary for homeless people, they moved to support their own entity that could achieve this end. In the decade and a half since the organization was funded, Housing Works has built on the power of the

harm reduction and global AIDS movements to create permanent housing—and a community—for thousands of socially vulnerable people whose struggle with HIV/AIDS was complicated by histories of chemical dependence.

In interviews that follow, King and Cylar tell the story of Housing Works. The interview with King was conducted a year after Cylar's death from HIV-related cardiomyopathy in 2004. The interview with Cylar is the previously unpublished portion of a series of interviews I conducted with him in 2000-2001, some three years before his death (see Shepard, 2002, for the first half of this interview). The piece is structured so that the story of Housing Works' founding is provided by King, while its service and community-building model is detailed by Cylar.

Woven around King's 100-plus and Cylar's 50-plus arrests is the story of a radical housing model. These oral histories address the difficulties homeless people face and the creativity needed to turn despair into practical defiance which helped Housing Works thrive. The interviews also examine the uneasy trajectory from direct action into service provision. While many other organizations "bureaucratized" once funding became available, Housing Works was built so that it could be torn down if it became just another service provider. In the years since its founding, Housing Works has vigorously protested, lobbied, targeted its funders, lost funding, been exonerated, successfully sued mayors, and - more than anything else - built



King being arrested in 2005 during a zap at the bookstore of the Family Research Council (FRC) as part of the Housing Works/Campaign to End AIDS. The protest was over the FRC's influential advocacy of abstinence-only HIV/AIDS prevention approaches now adopted by Bush as the only means of preventing HIV/AIDS. (Photo Credits Housing Works)

homes and communities for those whose only other viable housing alternative was prison. The following is its story.

Part One – Charles King

Charles King began his interview by recalling his first organizing efforts:

CK: Actually, my first organizing was doing bus ministry in Huntsville, Texas – saving souls with small children (laughs ironically). And it all kind of grew from there. The bus ministry ended

up becoming something very political because I was bringing African and Mexican-American children into an all-white church. It became quite controversial. And I would date my consciousness of racism and classism to that experience. Moving beyond that, when I was living in San Antonio, I was the Minister of Street Ministries at the First Baptist Church there. Then I started becoming involved in political efforts. It started out with anti-police brutality work, organizing against the death penalty, and that kind of led me into circles where I became involved with a sanitation workers' strike. So it was kind of interesting how the connections got made. Then when I was in Yale Divinity School, I was the graduate fellow at Greg Hall, which was the Center for Service and Social Action. I worked with undergrads on social service and organizing projects. Draft registration had just been reinstated, which became a campus issue, and the first Reagan Budget [was announced] with huge cuts for social services. The first demonstration I organized was around Reagan. We had a rally with 5,000 people. The first arrest I took was with a group of students protesting reinstating the draft.

INTERVIEWER: What brought you to your first ACT UP meeting?

CK: My first ACT UP meeting... It was my first year of law school. I had left my last parish and drove buses for a year trying to figure out what to do. During my first year I was here in New York at Cardozo [School of Law, Yeshiva University.] And I think I saw a

flyer about a demonstration. Since AIDS had been the issue that had led me to leave the last parish, I decided to show up. And it actually took over my whole life for a few years there (laughs).

INTERVIEWER: How did the move happen from ACT UP to Housing Works?

CK: You know, there were several of us in ACT UP, somewhat separately, who had been passing homeless people in the streets. The late '80s was when you started seeing the cardboard signs that said, "Homeless with AIDS Please Help." I was a poor student, so when I passed someone who was homeless on the street, I would give them a quarter. When I passed someone who had a sign that said they had AIDS, I gave them a buck. But I really hadn't figured what to do with that. And then it sort of crystallized when we attended the [1988] Republican Convention in New Orleans.

Those of us who went spent the week hell-raising, and organized a New Orleans ACT UP while we were there. And some of the folks who became very, very involved in what we were doing—who were demonstrating with us all day, every day—as it turns out were two homeless men. When we got ready to leave, they asked if they could come back with us. And we were very cavalier about how, yeah, things were better in New York. When we got back here and tried to help these guys get things together, we realized that things were much better for people with AIDS who were housed, but if you were undomiciled you might as well still be in Louisiana.

So we organized the Housing Committee of ACT UP. We spent the next year and a half very aggressively challenging the city around homelessness and AIDS and its responsibility. [Activist attorney] Ginny Shubert had filed a lawsuit, *Mixon vs. Grinker*, to establish the right to housing. I like to think of it as the best lawsuit we ever lost. We worked that lawsuit for years. We won all the way up to the state Court of Appeals. We lost there, but basically it forced the production of almost all the AIDS housing that now exists in New York City.

Anyway, Ginny had started that lawsuit at the Coalition for the Homeless. The Housing

Committee of ACT UP actually did its first direct action in support of a plaintiff in that lawsuit, to get the city to file an injunction to take this person out of the shelter. So to fast forward, we saw [Mayor David] Dinkins as our great hope. Ginny had actually drafted his position paper on homelessness and AIDS. But as soon as he was elected, he repudiated his position and adopted a modified version of the [former mayor Ed] Koch plan, which was literally to create segregated units in the armory shelters- indeed, running a curtain down the middle of the shelter - with people with AIDS on one side and other people on the other. In January of 1990, we brought in the first Presidential Commission on AIDS and gave them a tour of homelessness and AIDS. They wrote a really damning report that had absolutely no impact.

Then, *Mixon vs. Grinker* came to trial and a city commissioner, a gay man who later died of AIDS himself, testified that all homeless people who were living with AIDS were either chemically dependent or mentally ill or both. And that they were better off in the congregate shelters where they were less of a menace to themselves and others. It was sort of devastating to hear this. I actually remember a meeting on a Wednesday night the day of or the day after his testimony, we met in an apartment on Eighth Avenue and 23rd street. People were just so discouraged. And we started talking about it and decided that if the people that we cared about were going to be housed, then we'd have to do it ourselves. The only thing that we agreed upon was that we were going to start this new organization. And that it was going to be called Housing Works (laughs).

INTERVIEWER: Keith said you guys got an arrogant streak, thinking "if no one else was going to do it, then we were going to do it."

CK: That would be a fair way to describe it. We talked our way out of depression and into action.

INTERVIEWER: I'm wondering about your point about what you do to keep moving and keep from being discouraged. Eric Sawyer (2002) described some of the housing actions, like putting couches out on the street and

everybody sitting on the couches, following Martin Luther King's dramaturgical tradition. To what extent was a rambunctious creativity part of the spirit in which this group was born and part of its ongoing strategy?

CK: Well, to start off, the Housing Committee of ACT UP was amazing fun. I remember when we were trying to get [New York's HIV/AIDS Services Administration] HASA working, back then it was called the Division of AIDS Services. And they had a bunch of new hires - like 60 new employees - but hadn't given them any desks or workspace. So they were just spending their days sitting in a classroom. The union was picketing. So we organized this action. Eric actually drove the truck when we brought a bunch of desks and chairs and phones into the middle of Church Street in front of the HRA [Human Resources Administration] and handcuffed ourselves to them. I loved the chant. The chant was probably one of the best that we ever created: "The check is in the desk and the desk is in the mail" (laughs).

Our HPD [Department of Housing, Preservation and Development] action was another amazing one. On Gold Street they have revolving doors. We went around on a Sunday night and picked up a bunch of abandoned furniture on the Lower East Side. Monday morning we took it down to Gold Street and stuffed the revolving doors with furniture, trying to deliver it to furnish housing for people living with AIDS.

INTERVIEWER: So it was a blockade, too.

CK: What was actually cool about it was that we had been pestering Abe Biderman, the commissioner who had sworn that no HPD units were going to go to people with AIDS. He was very conservative. So we had been pestering him and we did that action. That very afternoon he issued a press release announcing that he'd established a commission to study whether or not they could identify housing for people with AIDS. That was in June. We waited until late August or early September, until right before the Dinkins/Koch primary election. Then we sent Biderman a fax saying we had another load of furniture to furnish housing for people with AIDS. "Where

would you like it delivered?" That afternoon he issued a press release announcing that they had identified 60 units of housing for people with AIDS. Of course, they were going to turn the units over at a pace of 20 units per year, over the course of three years. They were going to do the pilot project to see if people with AIDS could live in their housing.

So, the actions were fun. The actions were creative. We saw success at the margins. But at the end of the day, the truth of the matter was that AIDS housing providers did not want drug users. Homeless service providers didn't want people with AIDS. And so even if the government had been willing to take on its part of the responsibility, there probably wouldn't have been providers who were willing to do it with the people we were trying to get housed.

I think the way we brought that spirit of creative action into Housing Works was in how we designed the programs. Take our first scattered site program. Housing contracts around the country had some preclusion about drug use, requirements around being clean and sober. We demanded and demonstrated for a contract that would require us to take people who were still using drugs. What everybody else in the country was precluding, we decided we would fight for.

INTERVIEWER: When I moved to New York in 1997, I had heard about your using noise-makers and crashing Bill Clinton's birthday party. There was always this audacious quality of doing all the things you were not supposed to do. While other providers and social workers were talking about collecting data and making arguments, you were protesting against your funders and challenging them to do the right thing. There seemed to be a real liberatory quality to your work.

CK: I want to emphasize that it also played completely into program development. So, for example, our Independent Living Program started out as a total scam on the system. The way the system operated, the state rental assistance program was in place. The way New York City interpreted the regulations, you had to have an apartment and be at risk of an eviction to be entitled to the rental assistance. There was no way somebody

who was homeless could get access to it. So we started looking at ways to get around that. We started renting apartments on the open market. We would do a legal sublet with the client. We would move them in with a written promise from them to pay their broker's fee, security deposit, and first month's rent within 30 days of moving into the apartment. We would wait until 30 days passed, we'd serve them with an eviction notice, and they were now rent-stabilized so they could go down to HASA and apply for rental enhancement. We did this like 15 or 20 times. And that's when the city caught on to what we were doing and confronted us. But there was nothing illegal about what we were doing. Our response was, "We're not the ones who are acting illegally, you're the ones who are acting illegally. Set up a system so homeless people can pre-qualify and we'll stop doing this." And they ended up caving in and setting up that kind of system. Even then, in the scattered sites, the city-funded apartments, people would get up to a certain amount of rent and utilities were folded into the apartment's rent. So we started renting our ILP apartments utilities included. That got us our first DOI investigation.

The job-training program also started off as a scam. We wanted our clients—and most of them were active users—to have some safe space, so providing them with stipends to work around the office was a way to do that. But most of them, because it was so hard to get an AIDS diagnosis, were still on public assistance. Under the public assistance regulations, there was a dollar-for-dollar offset against your benefits. Ginny Shubert was actually the one who researched the regs and came up with the fact that expenses related to a job-training program were exempt from this offset. So we called it a job-training program. And our clients did not understand. We explained to them what we were doing and why we were doing it, but they were the ones who then turned around and said "but we want a real job-training program." And again, we went to every possible job-training program, public or private, and what we heard pretty universally - some were polite in how they phrased it, some said it just this way - "why would you spend money for people with

AIDS to work when they are just going to die anyway?" And so, going back to the idea of despair turning into the arrogance that allows you to take action, that solidified it for us. We were going to create a job-training program that worked for homeless people with AIDS, even if we didn't get a dime from anybody to put it into place. We were going to put it into place because the whole fucking world had said "you can't do this."

INTERVIEWER: I thought of that playing when I read the *New York Magazine* article on the group (Barasch, 1998). The story talks about you sitting around a table laughing, but you were playing with ideas. Everything was on the table. And that was the interesting thing to play with and think about.

CK: Actually, when we started out we opened an office with one desk, one phone, and five chairs. It was kind of an interesting thing. Now that desk, the reason we had that desk was it was too big for the tenant that preceded us to get it out of the space. So, it was this huge monster desk. It became our conference table. And I remember we used to sit around that table every morning for like problem solving. Then we'd have these weekly staff meetings. We were small enough to sit around this desk and do these weekly brainstorming things. And you're right, it did sort of help break out of the box and we'd think of wild and crazy ideas. And sure enough, one of these wild and crazy ideas would work. So, yeah being creative in the actions is important but it was also really important that we brought that same spirit of can-do playfulness, creativity to thinking about what programs would look like.

INTERVIEWER: Barbara Epstein (1991) describes a kind of pre-figurative politics framed within building community and the image of a better world within present organizing. The good news is now. The kingdom exists in this room. Such an organizing model is not unlike the idea of realized eschatology, the notion of building heaven's glory on Earth from Christian theology. This seems to overlap with the notion of pre-figurative community building referred to by many organizers.

CK: Right now, you're talking my language.

INTERVIEWER: The good news is we do live in the kingdom, to a certain extent. Let's show people that. It works, syringe exchange, we'll give clean needles out; housing active drug users really makes sense. Giving people housing is a good thing. And I think by saying we're building a community right here in this moment. Showing it within your protest, showing it within your programming, and then the funding following that seems to be part of the spirit.

CK: I think that that's a fair image. It's very interesting that we've spent a whole lot of time this last year—Housing Works is constantly going through change, but particularly Keith's death has put us through a wrenching change—and so we've spent a lot of time this last year not just talking about strategic planning and managing change but building community. And it was out of that whole community building exercise that we developed a whole values manual. I don't know how many organizations have a values handbook. And our senior staff meetings have been very dynamic conversations that have been on one level very disturbing because once we take the focus off the government as being the bad guys talking about how to stop the epidemic, we find that in this very diverse community, that there are a lot of prejudices and preconceptions that we've not turned to focus on. And so we've now started a series of discussions that are going to provide space for us to have those conversations in a way that's not just speaking out of people's prejudices but facts and informed positions kind of thing. I think that the community building work is kind of at the core. And I think sometimes we lose our focus on how central that is to what we do.

INTERVIEWER: That's a bit of my impression, of building a space for people who were not supposed to have a space, literally building them a home. A home is more than bricks and mortar.

CK: It takes a lot more than bricks and mortar for it to become a home. Our theory on that here at Housing Works has always been and it took me a while to persuade Keith

that this was the right theory, he thought it was a little bit too religious, but he finally got there

INTERVIEWER: Keith was a member of religious communities, including leather (See Mains, 1984/2002; Rubin, 1997).

CK: Yeah, I know, I know. It was a notion that I brought with me out of the church because whether it was my own experience with the church or people who I worked with in the church, I always found myself working with the folk who the church tended to shut out. And it was so ironic because those were the people who the church should be reaching out to. I remember when I was working with homeless people in San Antonio, I did an outline for a book that will probably be never written but I had titled it *Members of the Community*. And ACT UP as Church within all of this. The idea of a church herding people together to minister to one another; and so the non-religious terminology that we've used for that is a healing community. And that a healing community is a place where everyone acknowledges that they have reasons why they need to be a part of this community. So it's not just us helping them.

INTERVIEWER: It's healing the broken parts of ourselves.

CK: Exactly. And it marginalizes people, whether they are marginalized because they are homeless, because they are victims of domestic violence or sexual abuse or they're addicted, whatever has shoved them off on the margins. Part of creating a community is not just offering them help but offering them a place where they can give help. That's really what it's about. If it's just about us-helping-them kind of relationship nobody gets healed. All you do is create dysfunctional dependencies that are mutual. We then need to keep the Medicaid money flowing so we keep them needing us so we can feel good about helping them and all those.

INTERVIEWER: You wouldn't want a cure because it would get in the way of all the pills flowing.

CK: Right, exactly.

INTERVIEWER: Keith talked about Martin Buber (1970) *I and Thou*.

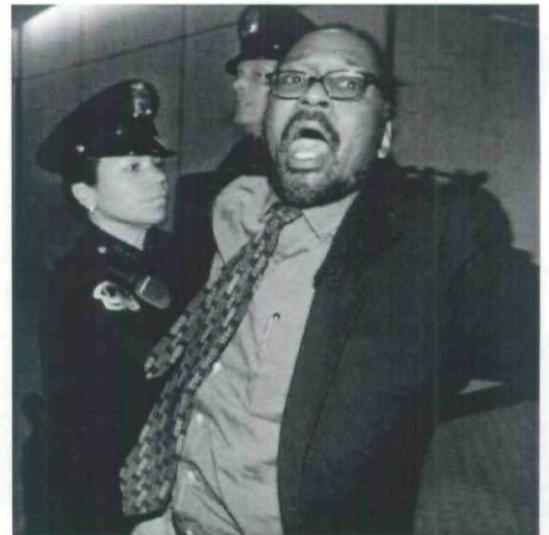
CK: It was actually through that avenue that I got him to buy into the healing community.

INTERVIEWER: I can also think of Mary Magdalene, the patron saint of sex work, of Harm Reduction, and Housing Works. Who do you go to—from communion to community—it's not a long stretch.

CK: So actually where Keith was, where this was sort of his force, was in his attack on contemporary social work theory. Keith was absolutely the most insightful about the need to tear down existing social work structures. We talked a lot about breaking down boundaries. Boundaries are so important in social work. And how instead of trying to create the right boundaries what you needed to do was break down the boundaries that became barriers. You talk about fostering dependencies and how boundaries could actually foster that rather than preventing it.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by foster?

CK: Foster issues around transference. They create this false sense of divide that isn't real because we're human. We're connected.



Cylar being arrested at the hearings over John Ashcroft's nomination as Attorney General in 2001. (Photo Credits Housing Works)

Part Two – Keith Cylar

KC: The social service work we do is actually at the extreme of social service work because nobody knew how to treat an active drug user. No one knew how to deal with an

actively using person who was dying from HIV and AIDS, and they didn't want to confront that. Users didn't fit within their nice, neat little models. And here we were saying, "Fine, everybody that you can't work with in your program, I want. I want to work with them and I'll find ways to move them." A lot of that just had to do with... first of all you had to listen. You had to listen to the people. And when they told you that they were hungry, then you needed to fuckin' feed 'em. And when they needed this and this and this, if you met them and did this and this and this, then, you know what? They would try a little bit to do what you needed them to do. Which meant that they might need you to go with them to the doctor's office. You had to sit there and you had to explain why the doctor needed to do their blood work and you had to explain what this meant and you had to talk to them because the doctors and the nurses didn't have time. And the doctors and nurses were looking at them and seeing them simply as problems. They were people. They were wonderful people and they had lots of stories. They had lots of life and they had lots of wisdom. And they had a lot to give back, but nobody ever valued them. Nobody ever loved them. So you became this great positive cathartic thing to them that gave them this opportunity to reclaim their lives (see Shepard, 2002.) Because it wasn't something that you were doing. It was something that they had to do. Anybody who does this work who thinks this is about them, they are stupid. They are misguided. And they should go maybe be a minister somewhere, I don't know (laughs). But it's not about me. It's not about you. It's about a framework that allows your clients to do really hard work. But you give them a chance to live and you give them a sense of hope. And we were all of those things.

INTERVIEWER: It's community development as much as anything else. It sounds like a community that you are developing.

KC: It is a community, and it's a healing community that allows people to heal from a lot of really negative stuff. And did I necessarily set out to build a community? I don't think so. I think what I set out to do was just in response to the reality of what I knew was good

therapeutic intervention. I'm a clinician. I grew up in the milieu of hospitals and psychiatric hospitals and their models. I understand what it takes. It was no accident that I said it would have to be a positive cathartic experience that would allow them to move forward. I'm a humanist. I'm a whole lot of different stuff. So Housing Works represents a whole new way to do that therapy with this kind of population. 'Cause it isn't about how you treat people, it's about how you develop this thing that works for a large class of people. But the individual nuance of it is based on each individual's life and their history and their individual personhood. And so it isn't like you can have these common code-words. It wasn't really about that. It was about listening to the individual. And moving them, and helping them explore what works for them. And what worked for them was not whether they stopped doing drugs or not, what worked for them was whether or not they were going to live and whether or not they were going to die well.

And for me, the work we were doing was about helping people die well. That was really, really, really what it was about. Being about when they took that last breath, that they had made peace with themselves, with their families, and with god because they were going to die. And if they didn't do that kind of work or have that kind of energy about them, then they died really horrible deaths that were painful and really ugly. That was something I didn't want to see anybody go through.

INTERVIEWER: And yet Housing Works does so much, even welfare reform advocacy.

KC: Who better? Well, I actually hate the words "welfare reform" because when you say welfare reform, again you are talking about individuals' process of reclaiming their lives. They didn't want to be on welfare, they wanted the same things people like you want. They wanted a roof over their heads. They wanted to take care of their children. They wanted to be happy. I mean, we all want that. I hate the term "welfare reform." It isn't about reforming welfare - it's about creating opportunities for people to reclaim their lives. And welfare reform is baggage. It has such

connotations about welfare recipients that people then lose who they are.

INTERVIEWER: So then, what do you think are the essentials of doing antipoverty work?

KC: First of all, the number one rule is that an individual has to have a stable place to live. And if you have a stable place to live and you have food and you have safety – the basics of Maslow’s theory – if you have those components first, then you can start working on issues of education; you can start working on employment; you can start working on spirituality; you can start working on all those other issues that may lead to a decrease in negative behaviors that those people may manifest. Self-destructive behaviors – you can start labeling them all sorts of things, right? But we’re talking about creating a safe space for people to change and to grow. And every opportunity is a chance to grow either towards the light or towards the dark. That’s kind of the classic way that people like to look at life in this world.

So when you’re talking about welfare reform or you’re talking about poverty or whatever you want to call it, then you are talking about creating opportunities for people to enter into mainstream society and become employed and be able to manage an apartment and to be able to have the life skills to function. But the deck is stacked against them because they are black, they are poor, they may not know how to read. They may have come out of abusive family backgrounds with sexual abuse going on; they may never have had an opportunity to sit at a dinner table and eat in what most people would consider a normal fashion. And so when you talk about reform, you are talking about having to start off at very basic levels and move up over a long period of time to allow those people to gain skills that they may never have had or never have had a chance to get.

But hey, that’s where we started. We started literally, in terms of a psychotherapeutic process, at square one – which was to give people a house. And then you hold people accountable, not for their drug use, but for the behaviors that they manifest. I didn’t give a fuck what drugs or how many drugs you took

if you behaved civilly. If you didn’t behave civilly that was a problem. And then after you got to the point where you behaved civilly, then maybe I had to talk to you about making your doctor’s appointments. And then I had to explain to you why you had to go to the doctor and what the doctor results meant. And then I had to explain to you what the interactions were between the HIV meds and your drug use and what was happening to you in a manner that you could understand. So sometimes what I was, and what Housing Works became, was a translator for this knowledge base – translating it back in a way that people can understand.

That’s where the whole notion of peers came in. Peers were people who had listened enough so they could take that knowledge and translate it back to people who didn’t have as much knowledge, but did so in a way which was in your language. They were the culture-bridgers between the dominant society and your own culture. That’s how peers worked. They were role models. They gave you a sense of hope. If this person who had the same kind of background and the same kind of misery and knows what it’s like to be locked down at Riker’s Island could somehow or another get there, then maybe I can too. Maybe it’s not impossible. Maybe there is some hope.

And those people who had made it could spot your game when you were trying to use, trying to get over, trying to rip off the agency. Then they clued me in: “This is where they are ripping you off. This is where they are taking advantage of you. They are not really doing the work.” It also served as a bridge to help me see what was going on within my own agency. There had to be certain rules and regulations that were enforced from a loving standpoint, as opposed to a punitive standpoint. You don’t help people grow by being punitive. You help people grow by having a clear sense of boundaries, by having clear rules, and sticking with those rules.

So it became a whole way in which you do social services. It became a whole way in which you looked at your clients. And it became this whole other philosophy. At the same time, the group of people who had to do this work had to support each other. And you

had to become a support person. That means you had to work through your own shit about your relationship with your parents, your family, and how you were raised, because you were bringing that into the therapeutic relationship. If you didn't have that kind of clarity, you didn't understand what was pushing your buttons about this woman who reminded you of your mother, and why you wanted to get her off your caseload because she was reminding you of stuff in yourself that you just didn't want to face.

So you end up building a community and you end up moving into that without realizing that that's what you are doing. And it isn't until you've done it that you just kind of look back and people say, "You've developed this community." And you say, "No, I'm trying to allow people to die well, and I'm trying to make this government give me what I need and give them what they need so they can do that and do that well." Maybe that's the way it all came about? (sighs). I'm not sure.

INTERVIEWER: You know, AIDS has become such a part of anti-poverty struggles and the center of the global justice movement, but when you look at your life's work of helping put it there, what do you think when you look back?

KC: Well, first of all, I haven't gotten to the end, so I'm not sure. I don't know how to think that way.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any final words of wisdom?

KC: What can I say? There's never enough time to fully flesh out what things meant or mean. I think that given an opportunity to just contextualize and communicate what it is that we intended to do - which doesn't mean that we're perfect at it, or that we haven't made a lot of mistakes, or that Housing Works today is all that I aspired for it to be, but I think it has begun a process to move people further along in a positive direction. At a certain point, you have to stop talking and start transcribing and say whatever it is that you are going to say, so maybe I should just shut up (laughs).

Afterword

On Monday, March 5, 2004, Keith Cylar died in his sleep. He had lived with AIDS since the 1980s. Charles King and this writer, like many in the New York AIDS activist community, had spent the previous Friday night at a funeral for Joe Bostic, an activist with the New York City AIDS Housing Network (NYCAHN) who had recently died of AIDS himself. It was the second funeral for members of NYCAHN in recent months. Another member, Joe Capestani, had died just two months earlier. At the end of Capestani's funeral, Bostic's knees buckled as he lost feeling in his legs. Cylar, who had been at the funeral with King, waved down a cab, paid the driver, and send Bostic back home to Brooklyn. Two months later, Bostic died of kidney and heart failure - both complications of his HIV (see Villarosa, 2004). The Rev. Charles King spoke at Bostic's memorial. He asked those in attendance to imagine the place in heaven - or whatever afterlife we believed in - for AIDS warriors.

Jennifer Flynn, the founder and executive director of NYCAHN who organized Bostic's memorial the previous Friday, send out an e-mail reflecting on Cylar's death.

"While it is hard to imagine a place that could fit all of the incredible miracles that Keith brought to us, he certainly will be there and he certainly will be leading the chants and cheers when the rest of us figure out how to win and finally end AIDS. Without him, that too is getting harder and harder to imagine."

In Flynn's message, she included the statement from Housing Works, written by Terri Smith-Caronia, the Housing Works Director of New York City Public Policy:

"We are sad to announce the death of Keith Cylar, the Co-Founder and Co-President of Housing Works. Keith had lived with HIV for over 20 years and was diagnosed with AIDS

in 1989. In the last year, Keith developed cardiomyopathy, a serious enlargement of the heart. He died in his sleep early Monday morning of a cardioarrhythmia.”

Keith spent the last 20 years of his life working as an AIDS activist and built Housing Works into the largest and the most militant community-based AIDS services organization in the nation. Because of this work, thousands of formerly homeless people with HIV and AIDS are living safely in their housing; hundreds have found jobs, and thousands more have received other vital services.

His fondest wish was to bring an end to both homelessness and AIDS and to ensure that nothing like these two plagues would ever devastate his people again. In his memory we continue the struggle.

Cylar’s funeral took place in two parts. Part one included services and a rally in New York City. The words “Keith Cylar Keep Up the Struggle!” echoed through the New York streets where he had once walked. Part two took place later in May of 2004 when thousands rallied in Washington, D.C., and some 100 of us - including this author, Charles King, and many leaders of the AIDS movement - conducted the largest AIDS civil disobedience in Washington since 1987 (see Shepard, 2005).

The months of meetings needed to complete the interviews with Cylar took me from one hot spot in town to the next, where I selflessly drank vodka cranberries with the renowned AIDS activist. The final interview, featured above, was completed on Martin Luther King’s birthday in January 2001 after watching a football game over pizza and beer. We’d been out interviewing and talking until all hours the night before, but it was worthwhile to complete the interview, the first part of a book about his life that Cylar hoped would be completed. There were so many sides to Keith, but a primary piece that I saw was the caring, playful spirit with which he went about his activism, friendship, fellowship, and communion.

A couple of weeks later, we both went to Washington for the protests surrounding George Bush’s first inauguration where Cylar was arrested disrupting John Ashcroft’s confirmation hearings (the photo is included above). A few weeks after that, Cylar and I met in the East Village for margaritas. After the fun of the drinks wore off, Cylar became emotional, a little sick, and tears flowed with grief for the friends he had lost during the first time the Reagan/Bush crowd had been in charge. He told me he had fought Reagan and the first Bush, and he could not believe America had elected another Bush, who was dead set on the annihilation of people with AIDS. Three years later, Cylar himself passed only months before Bush was re-elected.

Despite these losses, Charles King continues organizing, now as the reluctant sole president of Housing Works. Jawaharlal Nehru, who took over leadership in India after Mahatma Ghandi was assassinated in 1948, said that he felt like the light had gone out in his life and that it was hard to go on with the non-violent struggle after Ghandi’s untimely death. (Blackburn, 1989) Many in the AIDS movement feel the same way after losing Cylar. Yet the power of peaceful resistance continued in 1948 with Bayard Rustin, the Quakers, and later Martin Luther King. The North American Civil Rights Movement built on the trajectory established by Ghandi. ACT UP, and later Housing Works, found inspiration in that same tradition. Cylar and King worked to create a righteous non-violent opposition to the AIDS crisis and the waves of homelessness that followed. Yet, as always with the story of Housing Works, loss turns despair into an audacious commitment to fight with creativity and care. Just days after Bush’s re-election, King (2004) called for the entire AIDS community to dust themselves off and remember:

“It doesn’t matter who is President or who controls Congress; if we can organize the grassroots in our country - everyone living with HIV and AIDS and everyone who loves someone who is living with this disease - we have the power to force change and to force our leaders to bring an end to this plague.”

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