

Michael Chanak – World AIDS Day, December 1, 2022
First Christ Church Covington KY
Theme: Equalize

Good evening. My boy name is Michael Chanak but I'm otherwise called "Goose." When I asked Patti Schwartz our committee chair to have the privilege of sharing with you this evening, it wasn't because I believed I represented the many impacts and faces of HIV/AIDS since 1981.

I've been a volunteer in the background of this event for some years. I was 32 when by most accounts the pandemic began in 1981, like many of you I lived through the deaths and the advances, and with a little luck and the Goddess's blessing, we all hope to see a cure in our lifetime.

Now, I just turned 73 and I realized a lot of things, including part of my own personal journey with HIV, isn't something I've talked about publicly, and probably even my oldest friends don't know. So, yes this will be personal. In 1972, just a year out of Kent State University, I met a man by the name of Larry A Myers Jr. Even after graduation, I'd travel to Kent to attend their then-Kent Gay Liberation Front meeting. There is where I met Larry. I guess it was that era - where lesbian activist bureau potluck meets Tinder.

Larry played a number of roles in my life, from a lover, companion, and "sister" but always a friend. The romantic part of our relationship ended in 1982. Fast forward to the 2000s, a social worker friend, the late Bill Abney who worked from the Hamilton County Jobs and Family Services – while we were both volunteers at the old community center asked me "why I never talked about all the death in the early years of HIV." You know, social workers, have questions. He speculated about loss and whether it was survivor's guilt. I don't know if I had an answer for Bill, but as I am prone to do, I took it inward. You see my friend Larry passed of HIV in November of 1988. Just before, Larry's death he called me and said "Michael, I don't want to die?" I stumbled a moment and said, "I know, I love you." Until you've heard those words, the depth of this ...I felt so powerless.

Even before Larry's death, I was involved in community volunteerism with many friends in the HIV community. This wasn't new for me. I ended up getting a job at P&G as a "lab tech" at the old Sharon Woods Technical in Blue Ash, recently torn down. I came out at P&G in 1986 when I showed up at Fountain Square and was videotaped by WCPO kissing my friend, the late Dr. Bob McNee, a geography prof and chair of the department at the University of Cincinnati. By the time, I got to work on Monday, all of Procter knew and everyone else.

No surprise, perhaps, but before 1986 came to an end, I was transferred to an oral Rx mouth rinse brand called Peridex – newly approved by the FDA for gingivitis. It didn't take me long to see into this transfer. P&G was attempting to market the rinse-off label to the dental professional as a treatment for the then common oral manifestation of HIV – thrush or "yeast infections" which were more common before the more drugs effective drugs came along.

So, Procter in its market research realized the product was being prescribed in major metropolitan areas – the same areas where large communities of gay men lived. It then became clear to me my job seemed to be to use my personal resources to help Procter market this product.

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I was a gay man, who lost a former boyfriend to HIV – and maybe someone thought the then nerdish young technician who seemed very corporate would remain silent. But with Larry's death and the hundreds more that many of us saw, I began to speak up in those team meetings. My question "how can we market to folks we cannot claim in our inclusion and diversity statements." The struggle was on for 5 years but on 9-15-1992 all that changed when P&G approved that change. Then only 3% of the United State's fortune 500 companies had such protection. Today, there are 6000 members of GABLE, the P&G affinity program. Just ask Vincenzo Volpe, who is here this evening at the HRC Equality Index.

Now, I think back and wonder how could it be in the midst of all the great suffering and trouble – how the act of one major corporation and a handful of allies helped to change the standard of inclusion for its competitors and another step towards making it safe for others. I happen to believe this pandemic whether personal, in our work or volunteer lives, challenged all of us, and motivated us in ways that are extraordinary. P&G was one example. HIV is a powerful disruptive force.

The truth is simple, all these victories belong to all those gay and straight allies who tended to persons with AIDS, the lesbian community with its blood sisters' program, celebrities who stood with us and raised money –the medical and scientific community and so many more that came together and yes to all those who were lost and will continue to be lost...

There is work to be done for this pandemic and it is not at an end. And so, we honor all those living with HIV and those who passed on this day.

I miss those folks and yes, Larry, I love you and miss you daily. Now you know my story, and I thank you for listening. Namaste.