

The Front Page

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Gay and Lesbian Health Conference held in Denver, June 9-12

by Phil Nash, Gay Press Association

An enthusiastic group of women and men literally joined hands at the close of the Fifth Lesbian and Gay Health Conference, held in Denver June 9 through 12. They included doctors, clinical workers, health administrators and educators, lesbian and gay activists and persons with AIDS.

"Health Pioneering in the '80's," as the conference was titled, featured workshops, symposia and medical forums addressing the full range of issues affecting the health of gay men and lesbians. To no one's surprise, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) claimed the most attention from the nearly 300 registered participants.

The conference was jointly sponsored by the National Gay Health Education Foundation (NGHEF), the American Association of Physicians for Human Rights and the Gay and Lesbian Health Alliance of Denver.

Throughout the weekend, participants attended sessions ranging from sophisticated medical and scientific presentations to informal exchanges of ideas on health alternatives. The conference treated the issues of health holistically, integrating spiritual and political issues into some formal policy decisions developed in various workshops.

In greeting the delegates, Dr. Paul Paroski, outgoing president of NGHEF, decried the loss of trust between activists and organizations around the country. Paroski said personal glory, territorialism and secret agendas had replaced positive and supportive cooperative efforts of the past.

"Look around and look at the people who want power. Like AIDS, this antipathy is killing us," Paroski called upon the conferees to "realize that everyone in this room has something unique and valuable to offer." He continued, "We do not have to re-invent the wheel in New York, re-invent it again in San Francisco, Atlanta, and then in Denver."

Paroski was alluding to behind the scenes strife between some organizations which have approached policy decisions and handling of priorities differently during the AIDS epidemic.

National AIDS Federation Founded

As if in response to Paroski's remarks, thirty-eight separate organizations joined together at the Health Conference to form a federation of AIDS groups. The two top

priorities of the new group are to establish a lobbying project and to develop a resource and information network, according to the founding guidelines developed at the conference.

With a goal of raising \$200,000 nationally, and making half that amount available within the first thirty days of the federation, plans call for offices to be established in Washington, D.C. Ron Vachon, Executive Director of the National Gay Health Education Foundation has been selected interim director of the resource and information project, to be temporarily headquartered in the offices of NGHEF in New York City. New York's Gay Men's Health Crisis was chosen to be the federation's temporary treasurer and will provide volunteers to assist in the resource project.

The federation was founded, in part, to better share information, avoid duplicative efforts and to unify efforts at carrying out actions throughout the country. The Interim Steering Committee of the Lobbying Project will choose a selection committee to hire a lobbyist who will select a staff of three other persons, including a media coordinator, according to current plans.

The permanent steering committee plans to meet in New York City in mid-August.

Persons with AIDS Have Powerful Effect

One of the most strongly felt presences at the Health Conference was that of a dozen or so gay men with AIDS. In informal discussions, these men spoke openly of their concerns with conference participants. One of their primary concerns, they said, was about being portrayed as "victims" in the media.

Bobbi Campbell, who has AIDS and writes about AIDS in a gay newspaper said he got frustrated talking to the media about his experience with AIDS only to have the media identify him as a victim. He also says he is only an AIDS patient about four hours of every week, and the word "patient" carries a connotation of passivity. Campbell now uses the term "persons with AIDS" to refer to those with the disease. "Language not only reflects thought, but shapes it," says Campbell.

Other gay men with AIDS shared a fear of being considered "lepers" or "damaged goods" by their own community and voiced opposition to that myth. One man said that he formed his first long-lasting relationship in a

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Photo: John Schoenwalter

"AIDS is a medical issue first," said CDC's James Curran, a political issue second." In the photo, from left to right, are: Jeff Richards (AIDS Forum Coordinator), Curran (CDC), Fran Miller and Dan Pheffer (Conference Coordinators).

People with AIDS express feelings of frustration, need for adaptation

by Phil Nash and Bill Britt

At a workshop titled, "Meeting the Needs of People with AIDS", held at the Fifth Lesbian and Gay Health Conference in Denver, five men told a gathering of about 85 people about the experiences of living with an incurable disease. The five had been diagnosed with AIDS, a disease that has now struck over 1,500 people, nearly three quarters of them gay men, in the last three years.

Bob Cecchi told the group he had just started working a new job as a carpenter when he was diagnosed with AIDS over a year ago. He said he continued to work hard until the debilitating effects of the disease took over. "One day I went to work and I picked up my hammer and it felt about forty pounds heavier than it did the day before, and after a couple of hours of work, I knew that it was the end of (the job)." As he fought to control his tears, in a voice cracking with emotion, Cecchi told the audience he didn't believe he would live long enough to build something so that others would remember him. "As qualified as all of you are," he told the various health professionals, "nobody understands what it's like to be in this condition."

The workshop was to give health care workers the opportunity to discuss the aspects of patient care, not only with their peers, but with those with AIDS as well. But as this workshop, scheduled halfway through the conference, Cecchi expressed dismay with doctors and other conference attendees. He said he expected to have spent more time talking with health providers about AIDS. "You people aren't using me and I am here to be used. Only one person in the conference has come up to me and asked me a patient-related question...Get to the bottom of it," he challenged. "Don't be afraid of what you have to ask me."

Cecchi's attitude characterized the frustration also expressed by several other gay men with AIDS who attended the conference. Because AIDS is regarded as the scientific community's newest challenge, those with the disease are struggling with the prospect of a drastically shortened life even as researchers peer into diseased cells and collapsed immune systems in search of a cure.

To help AIDS sufferers, dozens of health care projects, many dealing exclusively with AIDS, have formed across the country.

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