

Confronting the fear: For AIDS Walk leader, finding cure is life

BY SUE DOYLE
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Banners advertising more than two decades of AIDS Walks hang on the walls of Craig Miller's Los Angeles office—testaments to the years spent confronting the illness that still sparks scandal and fear.

They are also evidence of Miller's dedication to pursuing a cure for the disease—one that led him to give up his career in politics as his personal interest evolved into a professional passion.

"It's a great privilege to do this kind of work," said Miller, who grew up in Canoga Park.

"We all have choices to make in life, so as long as the AIDS epidemic exists, there's nothing I'd rather be doing than devoting my time to confronting it. Frankly, I think it's how I can be most useful."

Toward that end, Miller has dedicated his adult life to raising money, garnering attention and support and speaking on behalf of the estimated 1.2 million Americans living with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

He founded AIDS Walk Los Angeles in 1984, when the country was just awakening to the disease thought to strike only gay men. And he can still recall the terror that spread through the gay community.

"It's not so much that I was alone. We were alone—gay men were alone. There was very little being done to address this public-health emergency.

IF YOU GO

This year's AIDS Walk Los Angeles will be held Oct. 15. For information or to register, call (213) 201-WALK or go to www.aidswalk.net/losangeles.

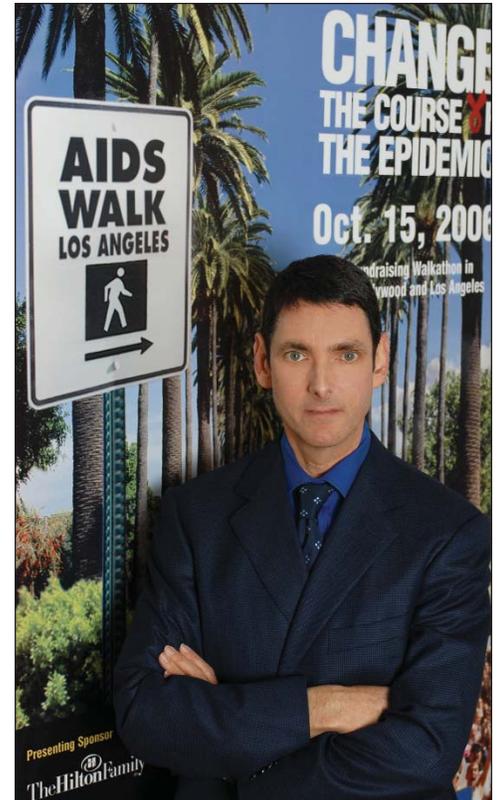
"I was also very offended by the lack of response from the government. I took it personally."

The disease moved to the forefront of America's consciousness in 1985, with the death of actor Rock Hudson, who had hid his homosexuality. America lost the flamboyant pianist Liberace to AIDS in 1987 and gasped in 1991 when NBA idol Magic Johnson announced that he had contracted the human immunodeficiency virus.

But with a nation still largely uncomfortable talking about sex and presidential administrations speaking only to abstinence, the 47-year-old Miller finds the same fear and silence from the 1980s is still pervasive in some communities today.

"It causes people, particularly young people, to be deprived of the information they need to be healthy. It's really outrageous," said Miller, president of MZA Events Inc., which produces AIDS Walk Los Angeles and other walks across the country.

For the past 22 years, he has rallied hard for national and local attention to the disease that mushroomed during the 1980s during a social climate that wasn't particular-



ly interested in gay men and a political atmosphere determined to cut the fat out of government spending.

Miller said it was the intersection of those issues that caused the country to miss the best chance it had to contain the health care emergency in its early days.

At the time, Miller and his gay friends thought they were all going to die from this scandalous disease that no one wanted to talk about.

For the young political upstart from Canoga Park, it was time to start a public conversation about sex, homosexuality and drug use.

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Relying on political strategies learned while working on re-election campaigns for former U.S. Rep. Anthony C. Beilenson, who represented the San Fernando Valley from 1977 to 1996, Miller mobilized 4,500 people and organized the first AIDS Walk in 1984.

The Los Angeles walk raised \$673,000. Continuing to pound the pavement since then, Miller and his company have raised more than \$300 million.

“He put all his political skills to work on this cause, and that’s what it needed,” said U.S. Rep. Howard Berman, D-Van Nuys, who met Miller through his political work.

“It needed a guy who understood mobilizing and organization to put those skills to work and to put the AIDS issue on the map.”

While Miller and others involved in the fight have directed national attention to AIDS, the disease con-

tinues to spread. Today, AIDS has moved heavily into communities of color, where discussions about sex among men are especially difficult to have, said Craig E. Thompson, executive director of AIDS Project Los Angeles.

In 2002, AIDS was among the top three causes of death for black men ages 25 to 54, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“In some ways, the conversations have become more difficult in the last 10 years than in the earlier years,” Thompson said.

Miller’s most recent challenge is Broward County, Fla., where he said the AIDS epidemic rages and remains invisible to most of the region’s 1.6 million residents.

Broward County ranks fourth in the country for new HIV infections and has the highest rate of the disease progressing into AIDS, said

Miller, whose group teamed up with the AIDS Healthcare Foundation this year to establish a fundraising walk there.

But they ran into obstacles after creating advertisements, which would run on top of taxis, for AIDS Walk Fort Lauderdale. The cab company feared the ads would tarnish the area’s reputation as a tourist destination.

After threatening to take the dispute public, the ads advocating AIDS prevention ran.

That mentality is precisely what perpetuates the AIDS epidemic in the United States, he said.

“It was a throwback to 1985,” he said. “It was a great reminder of what we’re up against—a society trying to come to grips with the AIDS epidemic.”

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AIDS Walk Los Angeles

The 10k walk (6.2 miles) takes place at 10 a.m., Oct. 15 in West Hollywood. The walk begins and ends in West Hollywood Park at San Vicente Boulevard, between Melrose Avenue and Santa Monica Boulevard. Money raised by AIDS Walk Los Angeles supports the services provided by AIDS Project Los Angeles in addition to other benefiting organizations representing the entire spectrum of HIV/AIDS Services.

