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AIDS Walks Make a Lasting Imprint

Craig Miller created the events that have raised millions nationwide to fight the disease. But he worries that not enough is being done.

By Josh Getlin
Times Staff Writer

NEW YORK—

He had been to Manhattan only once before, as a child, and when Craig Miller returned years later as a man in his 20s, the California AIDS activist embarked on what he thought would be a simple mission.

Fresh on the heels of the first AIDS Walk in Los Angeles, a 1985 fundraiser he organized that collected \$673,000, Miller wanted to hold a similar event in Central Park. He hoped to draw thousands of people and raise more money.

"I got a New York education in a hurry," Miller said, chuckling at the memory. "When I told city bureaucrats that I wanted to use the park, they cracked up. They thought I was a bumpkin who fell off a gay turnip truck. They just laughed at me."

On Sunday, Miller looked on proudly at a crowd of more than 45,000 people in Central Park who had come for New York's 20th annual AIDS Walk. The event raised \$5.8 million, a record, and was thought to be the world's largest AIDS fundraiser, sponsors said.

Miller, a quiet, dark-haired man with a perpetually pensive look,

had every reason to gloat. But the anniversary — and passage of time — only made him worry.

"If you ask me what's changed in 20 years of fighting AIDS, I'd tell you not enough," he said. "Anybody who thinks this fight is over is deluding themselves."

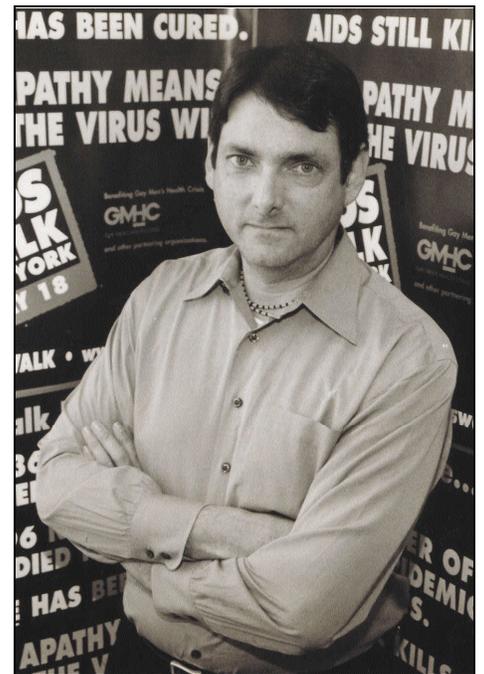
The story of how Miller and others launched AIDS Walks in Los Angeles, New York and other cities reflects the growing influence of gay men and lesbians, along with others determined to fight the disease. But it also highlights the persistence of AIDS.

"We have a lot to be proud of in New York," said Miller, 45, as he watched the crowd assembling near Sheep's Meadow. The participants — who raised money from sponsors — walked about six miles through Manhattan's Upper West Side, ending back in the park.

They were young and old, gay and straight—a festive, diverse group.

"If you ask how we pulled off an event like this, when so many people said we couldn't, I'd answer with three words," Miller said. "Clout. Inevitability. Immensity."

All three were on display Sunday, as singer Norah Jones, actor John Spencer of TV's "The West Wing,"



Donna Aceto

FOUNDER: Craig Miller had an idea for a Los Angeles fundraiser in 1984 that has blossomed into the AIDS Walk.

actress and singer Rita Moreno and other celebrities congratulated the crowd for turning out on a muggy morning with dark clouds.

Speakers warned against complacency, reminding that the epidemic was not over. They said nearly 1 million people were living with HIV/AIDS in the United States; more than 40,000 new infections are reported in the nation each year, mostly among people younger than 25, the National Institutes of Health says.

“There’s a lot of emotion in people here,” said Shulin Wang, a Bristol-Myers Squibb research scientist who drove about two hours from her Plainsboro, N.J., home with her daughter, Vania, to attend the event. “I’ve never been in such a crowd.”

Walking nearby, Grace Garland, a jazz and cabaret singer, said she was going to participate every year, as long as the disease persisted. “We all have friends, family members who died from this,” she said. “There’s no stopping until we find a cure.”

New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg praised the organizers at a breakfast before the festivities, saying more work needed to be done. “We know how to stop AIDS,” he said. “And shame on all of us for not doing better. We need to get more people tested in this city. We need education.”

For Miller, whose company, MZA Events, helped launch AIDS Walks in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and other cities, the irony was overwhelming.

“You have to remember what it was like to deal with AIDS in this country 20 years ago,” he said. “There was a sense of hopelessness.”

President Reagan was “deadly silent,” Miller said, on the mysterious public health emergency sweeping through gay communities and killing thousands.

Reagan didn’t mention the word AIDS until late in his presidency.

In Los Angeles, where Miller had worked on local political campaigns, activists were trying to mobilize the gay and lesbian community to fight the disease. He

came up with a novel idea in 1984: Why not blend the tactics of mass charity walks first popularized by the March of Dimes in the 1930s with modern campaign organizing strategies, and generate a new source of money to fight the disease?

Miller, who grew up in the San Fernando Valley, had gone on one such walk and recalled the effect it had. He approached the leaders of AIDS Project Los Angeles, which was operating out of an apartment in Hollywood, and sold them on the idea.

Sponsors had hoped to attract about 1,000 people and raise \$100,000. They drew more than 4,500 participants and collected \$673,000.

“Craig was someone who had the right idea at the right time,” said Craig Thompson, executive director of AIDS Project Los Angeles, in a video history of the AIDS Walk projects.

“There was a sense that government wasn’t responding to the problem, but individuals and people in the community could be organized.”

Members of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, New York’s leading anti-AIDS group, were impressed with the Los Angeles results. They flew to the West Coast days after the event and began lobbying Miller to organize a similar walk in New York.

His Big Apple baptism began. Years later, New York’s most powerful political and corporate figures have embraced the AIDS Walk.

The business model for AIDS Walks hasn’t changed much since the first Los Angeles and New York

events: A local organization hires Miller’s operation to organize the walk. He gets a flat fee; proceeds go directly to community groups.

As AIDS Walks spread to more cities, organizers say Miller’s organization has helped community groups raise about \$250 million. The most recent Los Angeles event attracted more than 25,000 participants and raised \$2.3 million, sponsors said.

But there has been a recent fundraising decline from AIDS Walks in some communities such as Chicago, Boston and Washington, D.C. Miller thinks he knows why.

“There’s a sense in the public and media that the HIV epidemic is no longer a terribly urgent matter, and the problem has somehow been solved,” he said.

“So organizers think it’s OK to invest less of an effort now,” Miller said. “But that’s so wrong. Instead of fighting the trend, they fuel the trend. And we all lose.”

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