

Through a Long Lens

Photographer **Jake Peters** has attended every International AIDS Conference but one since 1989. Here are his impressions—and images—of the most recent.

It was through my cousin Andrew Zysman, a San Francisco emergency room doctor and a member of Bay Area Physicians for Human Rights and ACT UP Golden Gate, that I attended the 5th International AIDS Conference (IAC), my first, in Montreal in 1989.

I interviewed. I photographed. I created a new career for myself. I witnessed anger, frustration, desperation, pleas for help and understanding and the first warnings of exponential disaster.

I have attended all IACs since then except Geneva in 1998.

At IAC Berlin in 1993, activists who had suffered the virus for five years demanded recognition as “long-term survivors.” It was the first time I had heard that phrase. Most of them, many friends, co-workers—and my cousin Andy—are dead.

In 1994, 10 years after my initial HIV exposure, I began a year-and-a-half-long battle with opportunistic infections that nearly killed me.

My recovery began with a paper bag full of saquinavir capsules given to me when I left Toronto’s Wellesley Hospital in February 1996. The hospital is gone—I’m still here.

Though sick, I was determined to participate in the 11th IAC in Vancouver. I attended, and showed 30 photographs in an exhibit entitled “HIV Phobia.”

The 1996 Vancouver Conference remains the most significant for me, as it is for many. That was when highly active antiretroviral therapy was introduced.

That too was the beginning of the tragic false hope and confusion that ensnares so many in the mistaken belief that they can indulge in the sexual habits of the ’70s, pretending that AIDS is no more than a social

irritation. There is too little discussion and too much stigma while new infection rates rise.

The 16th IAC this past summer in Toronto did not impress me. Having attended so many conferences and watched the pandemic expand over the decades, I see failure: still no prevention policies; still a lack of resolve by those who can and ought to do something to halt this out-of-control roller coaster.

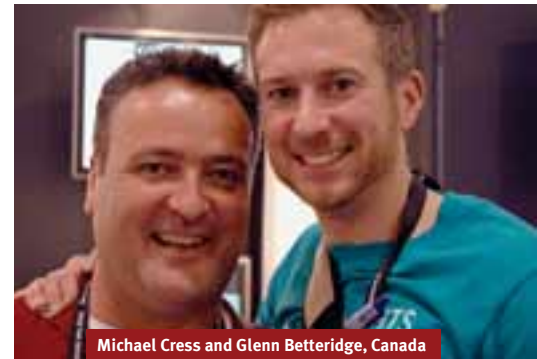
The greatest success I saw in Toronto was the brave and heartfelt actions by Treatment Action Campaign delegates from South Africa together with then-UN special envoy Stephen Lewis. They embarrassed that government into finally taking responsibility and reversing its deadly policies. South Africa is belatedly joining the battle—but what about Canada? What about the rest of the world? What advances can be realized before the next IAC in Mexico City in 2008? I expect to be there to find out.



Elizabeth Gold, Canada



John S. James, US



Michael Cress and Glenn Betteridge, Canada



Dr. Irene Silva, Francisco Porto Ribeiro & Vera Aveleira, Portugal



Edgar Carrasco and Renate Koch, Venezuela



Protest March



Grange Park



Dr. Jane Aronson

LET THE PROTESTS BEGIN

The stage was set in Grange Park, not far from the AIDS 2006 conference site. There, under a hot mid-August sun, Terri Ford, director of Global Advocacy, AIDS Healthcare Foundation, introduced speakers from around the world. The goal of the event was to mobilize delivery of AIDS treatment—a quarter century into the epidemic—to where there is little medicine and service available for those who need them desperately.

In succession, speakers appealed for an end to the roadblocks and delays. The theme of the protest was “AIDS Treatment Now.”

Speakers from India, Rwanda, Uganda, Cambodia and Mexico described being among

the fortunate few who are able to get anti-retrovirals to ensure their survival and health. They pleaded for the same opportunities for the survival of the helpless populations infected in their countries.

Among the speakers from wealthy countries, Barbara Lee, a congresswoman from California, and Dr. Jane Aronson, president of the Worldwide Orphans Foundation, urged listeners in the park to pressure their governments to solidify and realize policies that will speed up delivery of AIDS treatments, education and prevention, and to reject “abstinence only” moral postures which don’t work.

Canada has hosted three IACs: Montreal,

1989, Vancouver, 1996, and Toronto, 2006. Only once has a prime minister deigned to visit. That was Brian Mulroney in Montreal.

At the Toronto IAC, 1,000 pillowcases with stenciled messages criticizing the absence of Prime Minister Stephen Harper were distributed among delegates for display during the conference opening ceremonies.

One member of government I spoke to defended the prime minister, asking, “Should he attend and be booed?”

Perhaps, if he faced the public, if he showed leadership and tried to do the right thing, he would be cheered. But we’ll never know—he didn’t give us the opportunity to find out.



Sokun Sann



Terri Ford



Dr. Penny Lutung with clients



Karabo Moraka and Bob Phato

A SHAMEFUL DISPLAY

South Africa, richest of the sub-Saharan nations, has paid an astronomical human cost with nearly 1,000 AIDS-related deaths every day since the Durban IAC six years ago. “If these deaths were the result of aggression by another country,” remarked Dr. Francois Venter, president of the South African HIV Clinicians Society, “we would be on a war footing.” Instead, South African police have been known to shoot Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) protesters demanding AIDS treatment.

At the conference I approached two official representatives of the South African government, Bob Phato and Karabo Moraka, in their exhibitor’s booth. On the wall they showed examples of their controversial lime/garlic/beetroot treatment. A

bold sign read, “South Africa’s response to AIDS: the most comprehensive in the world.” I asked them to justify that statement. They could not. It made me wonder why they bothered to attend an AIDS conference in the first place.

TAC activists protested at the booth, highlighting the failure of the government to help its people, damning their health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, and rejecting their AIDS denialist conspiracy theories. Protester Mandla Majola held up fistfuls of female condoms that had been on display, pointing out that they are unavailable in rural areas and too expensive for those who need them.

At the conference closing ceremonies, when Stephen Lewis excoriated the South

African government for its inaction, Phato and Moraka had disappeared.

Postscript: In November, the portfolio for HIV/AIDS was moved from the South African health minister to Deputy Minister of Health Nozizwe Madlalala-Routledge, who immediately acknowledged publicly the weakness of government leadership on HIV/AIDS in the country. TAC announced: “The eight-year struggle to end government HIV denialism and confusion has ended. A renewed focus on local and global mobilization and the country’s painful embarrassment at Toronto created the space where government and civil society are jointly facing up to the challenge of saving lives.” +



Linda Mafu, TAC



Mandla Majola, TAC