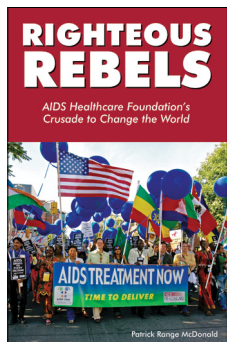


Books

Anyone can absolutely change the world



Righteous Rebels: AIDS Healthcare Foundation's Crusade to Change the World
 Patrick Range McDonald
 Prospect Park Books, 2016
 Pp 380. £12.81
 ISBN:978-1938849930

From its beginnings as a protest group in 1986, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation has grown into a US\$1 billion non-profit, generating more revenue than more established names like the American Heart Association. The AIDS Healthcare Foundation fights the war on HIV on several fronts: it distributes free condoms, provides HIV testing, operates media campaigns, and provides medicine to those who need it, all funded by a chain of pharmacies and charity shops. It provided two million free HIV tests in 2013, operates in 32 countries around the world, and aims to provide care for one million people in 2020. But how did this organisation rise to such a prominent position? What lessons can be learned from its example? Journalist Patrick Range McDonald was granted a year of behind-the-scenes access to the organisation to answer these questions, and his book *Righteous Rebels* was the result.

One clue as to the reason for the organisation's success lies in its origins. When Lyndon LaRouche Jr proposed an initiative in the 1986 California state ballot to "quarantine" people with AIDS, AIDS Healthcare Foundation founder Michael Weinstein felt compelled to act. However, he felt that working within the gay political establishment would result in "endless meetings" and very little action, and so the Stop the AIDS Quarantine Committee was born. It handed out leaflets urging readers to "Stop AIDS Concentration Camps" and organised a torch-lit march past LaRouche's headquarters. Although the gay establishment attempted to undermine the Committee's march by urging people not to go, between 2000 and 5000 people attended, and the proposition was defeated with a vote of 71% of the electorate. Once the proposition was defeated, the Committee decided to build on its success and address other AIDS-related issues. It organised public hearings on the "third world" state of care for AIDS patients, campaigned for dedicated hospice care, and in 1988 went on to set up its first hospice to provide professional care for those dying of AIDS.

Even nowadays, this activist spirit remains fundamental to the organisation, even when it risks upsetting its own allies. When Barack Obama planned to cut \$200 million from the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the AIDS Healthcare Foundation ran adverts near the White House with a picture of George W Bush, who started PEPFAR, and Obama, with the slogan "Who's better on AIDS?" This campaign made many of the organisation's liberal supporters 'furious'. The organisation has antagonised many within the gay community with its criticism of PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), the pre-emptive use of antiviral drugs to prevent HIV infection before potential exposure to HIV. This issue remains

controversial to this day, but Weinstein has argued that many PrEP users fail to take it regularly enough, and that it effectively encourages unsafe behaviour.

However, this provocative approach to HIV is coupled with the essential nature of the service the organisation provides. The AIDS Healthcare Foundation has a programme of mobile HIV testing vans that provide rapid HIV tests to people who otherwise might not get tested. These mobile clinics violated Nevada law, but the AIDS Healthcare Foundation simply ignored that, provoking the state to take legal action. However, the benefit to the state's citizens was so overwhelming that the state folded and changes to the law were introduced. The combination of provocation and the importance of the organisation's work brought about changes in the law that might have taken a decade if pursued through normal lobbying.

In the book, McDonald and Weinstein offer a disconcerting view of the realities of working in a non-governmental organisation. When antiviral drugs became available, many groups that served patients with AIDS feared that their funding would be redirected towards treatment. The AIDS Healthcare Foundation, which at that point was primarily involved in hospice treatment, risked bankruptcy to make the transition towards antiviral treatment—a decision that led to an attempt to remove Weinstein as leader. Similar issues persist to this day: when the author attended a conference he was struck by the role that "insider politics" and the need for funding played in policy decisions, and at the widespread feeling that the attendees needed to place greater focus on serving people.

The AIDS Healthcare Foundation places the patient at the centre of its work, and its mission is to provide "cutting edge medicine and advocacy, regardless of ability to pay". Its pharmacy programme places clients' needs first and revenue second; if a client is unable to pay for the prescription, the pharmacy will help them explore possible alternate routes to coverage and provide whatever is necessary until their financial needs are met.

McDonald has managed a deft balancing act with this book: on one hand providing a fascinating inside view of a billion-dollar non-profit organisation, while on the other hand providing a history of both the AIDS Healthcare Foundation and the AIDS crisis, full of human interest and compelling portraits of the major players in the organisation. However, this book was written with a larger purpose in mind: to inspire readers to take action and to provide a "blueprint for how anyone can absolutely change the world".

Robert Stirrups