

Brooks White Remarks 2007

Thank you, Reverend Rev. Charles Tigard of the MCC church, who will also be delivering the benediction this afternoon.

Welcome. I am Brooks White, a volunteer with the Friends of the Key West AIDS Memorial, the service organization which seeks to protect, preserve and enhance this beautiful and holy ground – to ensure dignity and respect for those whose names are engraved here. Thank you for coming, to join in celebrating and remembering the lives of our friends, relatives and lovers who have died of AIDS.

Today we gather to dedicate the addition of 20 names to our Memorial - those of 20 local individuals whose lives were cruelly and prematurely ended by the AIDS plague. They are listed in your program, and their names are in the two centermost rows of the section closest the entrance to the Memorial. The physical engraving is planned for early next year.

Regarding this Memorial itself, we stand on a unique resource. This is the 10th anniversary of the AIDS Memorial, and it is the only AIDS Memorial of its kind in the United States. As a City Park, and is maintained by the City of Key West. I thank the Leadership of the City of Key West, and specifically Mayor McPhearson and Commissioner Teri Johnston who represents this District, Commissioner Clayton Lopez who also sits on the Friends of the AIDS Memorial Board, and I also see several City and County leaders present with us today. The Friends of the AIDS Memorial thanks you for your support.

People often ask me why Key West has this AIDS Memorial. According to official sources, some 4 million people die of AIDS this year, with more than 30 million infected. With a problem this great, there are a farrago of aspects which must play together – medical,

financial, political and certainly one of the most important is grief.

For me, this horror started 25 years ago, when my good friend Stephen Sperry died on February 4th, 1980. His name is engraved in the front section. Since that period, our community has lost more than a thousand local people. A loss of that proportion over the last quarter century has left deep scars and in many cases festering wounds of grief. It is nearly impossible for anyone in our town to have not been touched by the grief of AIDS.

The medical community today offers new hope to those afflicted with HIV and AIDS. But our community is not so easily treated for our grief. It is fitting and proper that we remember those who have died and that we benefit from their inspiration, while we cope with the future of the AIDS emergency with hope.

As a theme, this ceremony has traditionally focused on some particular aspect or demographic of the AIDS patient population. Coping with a social emergency as huge as AIDS requires active participation of many different groups. In past years we have honored caregivers, nurses, and several other necessary groups of people who have worked to help our community through this crisis.

Tonight's theme is "Leadership; STOP AIDS. Keep the promise." I recall back in the early 1980s, as we dealt with AIDS in our community. It was the LEADERSHIP of several people from different walks that took this then very unpopular issue and tenaciously forced the community to deal with it in an effective way. I recall sitting in Ed Seebol's living room as AIDS Help was invented. I remember Jerry Franz, who constantly raised money for the cause. Reverend Steve Torrence of the MCC Church, who worked to help us deal with the spiritual aspects. The insight of Mike Dively, Michael Ingram and others who lead the movement to create this memorial.

One of the leaders who helped Key West deal with AIDS is Joe Pais, who will speak this evening. Joe has been a friend to our community for 27 years, and for the last 5 years served as Deputy Director of AIDS Help, Inc. He was on the Board of Directors of AIDS Help for six years. Many of us also know Joe Pais as a former City Commissioner in the early 1990s, and Joe was also a member and Chairman of the City planning Board. Joe understands leadership in the times of AIDS crisis, and I look forward to him sharing that with us tonight.

This ceremony will be brief, and I hope meaningful to you. Afterwards, please join me at the Lighting of the Tree of Hope, this year at La Te Da Hotel on Duval Street. Now I welcome Joe Pais.