NASTAD Honors Ronald Valdiserri as He Retires from Federal Service

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By Julie Scofield

I met Ron Valdiserri in 1992 when he was working with Jim Curran and others in the AIDS program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). I was working for Governor Mario Cuomo and giving federal policy advice to a brand new organization - the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors and their inspired leader, the Director of the New York State AIDS Institute Dr. Nick Rango. Our first meeting was from afar - Ron was part of a federal panel addressing the members of this new organization at their very first meeting and I was sitting next to Nick who was not happy with what he was hearing so he propped his feet up on the table and opened up the New York Times pretending to ignore the conversation.

Those were the days when storming the castle was the norm and everyone was taking aim at the federal officials who were themselves trying to move mountains to build a response to AIDS during an era of ignorance and indifference at best among most political leaders.

By early 1993, I was the Executive Director of NASTAD and Ron was at CDC in charge of writing the first guidance for a new initiative - HIV Prevention Community Planning. Unlike the care side of the equation, there was no Ryan White Care Act-like statutory language to guide prevention (although there was plenty of report language and some extremely disturbing Helms amendments). During this time and for many years, I felt like Atlanta was my home away from home as Ron and other CDC colleagues engaged in round after round after round of community consultation about almost every step that was taken. Weekly calls with Ron and colleagues were routine as we hashed through the issues of the day.

Having worked with Ron while he was wearing different hats at CDC, staying in touch during his time at the VA and enjoying a close working relationship with Ron while he has served at HHS, I can attest to his passion, impatience and enduring commitment to the fight against HIV and, in more recent years, hepatitis. And, I'm sure it will surprise no one when I say, it isn't easy being a passionate, impatient, highly committed, action oriented federal official. We have always needed activists and need them more than ever today. But I have always believed we need activists within government working for change from the inside out and Ron has been one of those activists, persisting without losing his passion.

The top five things I have appreciated so much about Ron through the years:

1. Ron has persevered through up and down, helpful and hostile Administrations, and numerous reorganizations and changes of leadership above and below him. Center directors, division directors, agency directors have come and gone. Institutional knowledge and wisdom are extremely valuable and way underappreciated. I hope Ron will write and teach about his experiences fighting epidemics from within the US government.

1. Ron always appreciated the importance of building the science base for prevention and for AIDS

policy overall. His extensive publication record is a testament to this belief and I believe it helped build the credibility and case for funding, for sound policy and for moving our programs forward.

1. Ron always had a deep appreciation for the public health system in the US and was always very clear about the roles and responsibilities of the respective players. I think this is why he was so effective spearheading HIV Prevention Community Planning because he appreciated the checks and balances required to move us forward. Representing state health departments, I always loved it when Ron invoked the US Constitution to explain federal/state/local public health authorities.

1. Ron is one of the few people in our field with whom I could always fight loudly and strongly in complete disagreement and walk away as respected colleagues and friends (at least after a cooling off period). He always followed through and kept his promises - or at least explained why he couldn’t and frequently reminded those around him to do the same!

1. At the end of the day, Ron always returned to the heart of the matter - is the initiative at hand going to help or hurt people with HIV and hepatitis? Whether you agreed or disagreed with Ron on a policy or process level, it was impossible to suggest that he didn’t care. Ron and I have a shared experience of being identical twins and of how being a twin makes you wonder sometimes about how people manage without them. Ron’s twin Edwin died of AIDS in 1992. I believe Ron has honored his brother’s memory each and every day that he has provided passionate leadership, action, and persistence in the fights against HIV and hepatitis and I’m so grateful to help celebrate this amazing career and to say thank you.

Julie is the former Executive Director of NASTAD. Ron is the outgoing Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health, Infectious Diseases and Director of the Office of HIV/AIDS and Infectious Disease Policy (OHAIDP) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and incoming Senior Research Associate and Distinguished Scholar at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Heath.

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