



Ambassador John Berry – AIDS Candlelight Vigil

**Ambassador Berry's Remarks for
The AIDS Candlelight Vigil
Hyatt Hotel, Canberra**

As prepared for delivery, May 18, 2014

When I met my first partner, Tom Leishman in 1985, this terrible disease barely had a name.

On our second date, over dinner, Tom told me that he had "It."

I knew what "It" was. Everyone knew what "It" was, even if they didn't like to talk about it. We also knew people were dying from "It".

Tom said that if I didn't want to pursue the relationship any further, he understood.

I told him that "It" would be a damn silly reason to abandon something that might turn out to be true love.

And true love it was – for nearly 10 years.

But, in 1996, this horrible disease had shrunk my 6'2" 200 pound athlete partner to less than 100 pounds. In June of that year, he died in my arms.

Thankfully, the world responded to the terrible "It" of 1985 – the disease we know as AIDS. As a result of passionate engagement and research, new drugs have given hope – and life – to millions.

In the early 1990s, it was estimated that infection rates in some sub-Saharan countries were as high as 1 in 3 adults. AIDS threatened to destabilize societies. It created millions of orphans and brought economic development to a screeching halt.

Even a decade ago, AIDS was – in many countries – still a death sentence. Societal and economic conditions in the worst affected countries hadn't improved.

But, thankfully, the international community responded.

It was an amazing demonstration of hope, of love, and of commitment to human life.

And, today, things have changed.



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Around the world, new HIV infections are down almost 33% since 2003. Deaths from AIDS are down 30% since they peaked in 2005.

This is very good news indeed, but we can do better.

I am a member of the generation that survived the worst of the disease at the very beginning. It falls to us to ensure that the next generation will not repeat the same mistakes. And that means educating our young people about prevention and transmission, sharing best practices, and supporting the research that will lead to prevention and a cure.

However, it is alarming that, in both Australia and the United States, new HIV infections are actually on the rise, particularly in young men.

HIV is not the common cold.

It only takes one unsafe encounter to contract this horrible disease.

Both the President and I hope that everyone will commit to an AIDS free generation.

We must ensure that the legacy of those we have lost is love. That their remembrance is a cure. And that we commit this terrible disease to the pages of history so that no one else loses a partner, a child, a parent, or a friend to AIDS.

Let me end tonight as I ended Tom's eulogy. The final paragraph of Thornton Wilder's classic *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is a meditation on love.

“But soon we shall die and all memory will have left earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”