

# 50 4 50 Birthday Notes

Rev. Alexander R. Garbera, 4/22/2006

Thank you for coming. It truly is a special evening for so many reasons... and many of the reasons why I am here tonight, aka still here, has something to do with each and every person in this room. If not directly, indirectly... a very beautiful web spun from the very causes we share.

I have not missed an opportunity to kvetch about turning 50, and do you know what the number one response is? Survey says, the number one answer I get is: *"You should be happy/glad that you are still alive."* I agree. A friend said that last night and my response was *"sad but true."* He was puzzled... I said *"that is very true. And that is what makes it sort of sad."*

It is a day of celebration, and I am very thankful for the life I have, my family and the beautiful friends, the lovers who filled and tore my heart. The people who I journey with, even the people who tick me off. I am very thankful, grateful, and gifted in so many ways.

But it still doesn't make that statement untrue, or unsad.. especially for those who died an untimely, early death or all those who live with HIV for even longer than I have, for those who suffer it alone, and especially for those without access to the tremendous love, support, services, and care that I have been blessed with.

It's sad because it does take a lot of work to live with HIV. For those of you living with HIV, and/or who have loved or cared for someone that is, you know how painful it can be.

As Ellen Gabrielle, the Executive Director of AIDS Project New Haven pointed out, back in the early days of HIV, we had to work hard at helping people die with dignity and even to get buried. Today, they are working hard at keeping people alive and the equation for survival hasn't become easier as some would assume with the new medications, but is becoming increasingly complicated as it is expensive.

So now, as we are faced with more people living with HIV, because people are living longer and people are still becoming infected, and as we are faced with decreasing resources and competition from other social ills and diseases..... AIDS Service Organizations have to do more, with less, and perhaps even diverting the focus from HIV to their own survival at times.

I wanted today to be a celebration.. not just of my life.. but every life... and every person living with and touched by HIV/AIDS. I wanted today to make people think about why having places like the NHGLCC are important, and maybe even think of ways we can do more to make sure that all those at risk for HIV are not forgotten, and have a place to fill that void that too many of us tried to satisfy with sex and/or recreational drugs. Well,, maybe I should just speak for myself.

Today is a celebration, not of my own will and determination, but all those people in this room, and those who couldn't be here, for journeying with me and making this day possible. Because this is what it takes to survive HIV/AIDS.

1) Faith. In something that is greater than and more powerful than HIV.. and will get us thru it, whatever that may be.

2) Hope. Hope begins by participating in hopeful solutions. Hope motivates us into action to create the changes we hope for.

2) Action. We need to be active participants.. show up for our lives.. because, ultimately, nobody cares about your own live than you do. We need to help others.. as Rabbi Hillel said... *“If I am not for myself, who will be for me but if I am for myself alone, who am I?”*

3) Health care. Quality health care that respects the dignity, worth, and wholeness of the individual, combined with knowledge and experience of how HIV operates, and the complicated patterns it' can create left to it's own devices is essential.

4) Essential Services: Studies show that things like nutrition and housing are directly related to health outcomes, they are good medicine. These are not unessential services.

5) Worth and Dignity. People need to be valued, not by ever looming bottom line, but by the very fact that they are sacred gifts from the very same source we all share.

6) Humor. Laughter is the best medicine... and sometimes things get so crazy..you just have to step back and chuckle.

I wanted to today to be a celebration, and hopefully the begging of the recognition that people living with HIV need to be recognized, counted, valued, and appreciated. There are many, many more valiant, heroic, hard working, and power examples of living with HIV than me.. Some of them are even in this very room tonight! Some of them visible;.. some work silently behind the scenes and carry their crosses with grace and dignity living extraordinary simple lives.

I want to give special thanks to The Guardian Health Association's president, Bob Sideleau for his hard work on this day, and all that he does for people with HIV... not to mention his own power of example who has touched many lives. Helen, who represents to me, the very essence of the strength, compassion, beauty, and wisdom of the female spirit. Tim, who truly is a copy jock, and a saint. John, for his technical and accounting expertise, generosity, and loving joyful spirit. Jimmy and Brian... who are powers of example in so many ways, both as individuals and as a couple. And speaking of powers of example, Lynda Fay Wilson, who as I have said, is my hero and helped get me involved in our HIV/AIDS community. For the late Dr. Alvin Novick, who sparked my inner advocate to come out.

I am very thankful for people like June Holmes, who has been in this fight since day one, and all the members of the Mayor's Task Force on AIDS, including the Mayor himself, who have not forgotten the battle, our unsung heroes, and those living with HIV/AIDS. The AIDS Service Organizations that still continue to fight the good fight and make a difference in the lives of their clients. People like Ellen Gabrielle and Joyce Pool, who as executive directors who have to fight the increasing ugly politics and economics of HIV/AIDS to do the right and best thing for their clients.

I am thankful for all my medical providers, even the ones that kicked me out of their offices. Special thanks to Dr. Gary Blick who is always out there, at the risk of controversy or worse, to go to bat for his patients and find new ways to help beat AIDS.

Like the academy awards.. I could go on and on.. but I need to thank all those that make a difference in my life, and you know who you are. If you feel you haven't .. it's only because you don't realize how you impacted my life or someone who has, or just haven't had the opportunity yet.

If you haven't had an opportunity to make a difference..whether it be in your life or someone else's.. Seize that opportunity. You won't regret it. Seize that opportunity to make a difference, and accept the blessings it engenders. The blessings that you are.

Who want's to take bets on 60?