



## Hattoy, Robert (1950-2007)

by Linda Rapp

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Bob Hattoy was a passionate activist for glbtq rights and the environment. After joining the 1992 Presidential campaign of Bill Clinton as an environmental adviser, he was diagnosed with AIDS. At the Democratic National Convention that year he gave a moving and memorable speech, identifying himself as a gay man with AIDS and calling for an active response to the crisis.

The Hattoy family hailed from Providence, Rhode Island, where Robert Keith Hattoy was born on November 1, 1950, but they moved to California when the boy was a teen.

A classmate and fellow band member at Long Beach High School recalled that the band leader "used to scream all the time, "Hattoy, shut up!"

Shutting up was not Hattoy's style.

After his graduation, he attended several universities but did not complete a degree. His passions were the environment and politics, and he eventually landed a job on the staff of Los Angeles city councilman Zev Yaroslavsky, in which capacity he worked on both environmental and rent-control issues.

Hattoy next took a position with the Sierra Club, an environmental protection organization, in 1981. The timing seemed poor since it came in the early years of the administration of Ronald Reagan, no particular friend of the environmental movement, and the fit of the irrepressible and outspoken Hattoy with the Sierra Club, generally regarded as well-intentioned but stodgy, appeared unlikely at best.

Neither of these factors daunted Hattoy. "Bob refused to get glum about everything or to say woe is we, which many were doing. He plunged into battles to protect the California coast as a happy warrior," said Sierra Club executive director Carl Pope.

Because of his energy and wit, combined with his abiding commitment to the cause of safeguarding the environment, Hattoy "humanized the Sierra Club, which had often been thought of as an austere bunch of mountaineers like John Muir [the club's founder] who only cared about rivers and mountains and didn't really relate to ordinary people who lived in cities. He put a different face on the Sierra Club," declared Mary Nichols, who knew him from his early days with the organization and later became an assistant administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.

When Arkansas governor Bill Clinton needed an environmental consultant for his staff as he launched a bid for the Presidency in 1991, he offered the job to Hattoy, who brought his characteristic verve to the work.

While on a campaign swing to Oregon in May 1992, however, Hattoy, who had been diagnosed as HIV-positive two years earlier, found a lump under his right arm and returned home to Los Angeles for medical attention. The test results were dire, showing lymphoma and AIDS.

Hattoy undertook a chemotherapy regime that eventually was successful in treating the lymphoma.

Soon after the diagnosis, Hattoy met with Clinton to apprise him of the situation. The subsequent conversation was an emotional one, in which Hattoy spoke not only of the devastating impact of learning that he had AIDS but also of the years of pain he had had, coming from "a completely dysfunctional nonsupportive family."

Hattoy and Clinton shared memories about living with abusive fathers. Their talk ended with a hug and a challenge: Clinton asked Hattoy to address the Democratic National Convention in New York City on the subject of AIDS. Hattoy readily agreed.

He was one of two people to speak at the convention on the topic, the other being Elizabeth Glaser, the wife of actor Paul Michael Glaser. She had contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion eleven years earlier and unwittingly passed it to the couple's daughter, who died in 1988, and their son, then seven years old.

Glaser called AIDS "everyone's problem" and spoke movingly of the death of her daughter and the grim prospects for her son and herself.

If Glaser spoke--appropriately--about the impact of AIDS on her own family, Hattoy evoked a larger one. Identifying himself as a gay man with AIDS, he stated, "The gay and lesbian community is an American family in the best sense of the word. . . . We are part of the American family, and, Mr. President [referring to George H. W. Bush], your family has AIDS."

Hattoy further chastised the preceding Republican administrations for their shameful failures to respond to the AIDS crisis. "The first case was detected in 1981, but it took 40,000 deaths and seven years for Ronald Reagan to say the word 'AIDS,'" he noted. "It's five years later, 70,000 more dead, and George Bush doesn't talk about AIDS, much less do anything about it."

Hattoy warned of the dangers of inaction, saying, "Martin Luther King once said that our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." He acknowledged the "fifty thousand people [who] took to the streets in New York [that day] because they will no longer be silent about AIDS" and stated, "Their actions give me hope."

He concluded his message with an exhortation to the delegates and the viewing public to consider the implications of the election with regard to administration policies: "We must vote as if our life depends on it. Mine does. Yours could. And we all have so much to live for."

Afterward, Representative Patricia Schroeder of Colorado declared to the assembly, "If that didn't touch your heart, you didn't have one."

Although Hattoy was buoyed by the presence and support of the glbtq community whom he was proud to call his chosen family, he had no blood relatives in the hall when he gave his impassioned speech. His mother was already deceased, and his father chose to go fishing instead of attending the convention.

When Clinton won the White House, Hattoy joined him there as an associate director of personnel and made it his mission to see that glbtq people had a place in the administration. His assistant Patrick Nolen, also openly gay, stated that Hattoy was tireless, working "sixteen-hour days, seven days a week" to promote worthy glbtq applicants, of whom there was no shortage.

On the résumé of Roberta Achtenberg, a candidate for Under Secretary of HUD, recalled Nolen, "Hattoy scrolled, 'HIRE HER! SHE IS THE BEST!'" In this and many other cases he was successful. Activist William

Waybourn stated that "of the more than one hundred GLBT individuals placed with the incoming administration, almost all were shepherded by Bob."

Hattoy regarded the White House as a "bully pulpit" and was determined to use his position to speak on glbtq issues. Journalist Sean Strub of *POZ* magazine compared him to Midge Costanza, an aide to President Jimmy Carter who had been a proponent for glbtq rights during that administration.

Hattoy was, however, even more audacious and willing to take risks by speaking out. In a 1993 interview he quipped that he had asked his partner, Bob Pelham, "Will you still love me if I'm a waiter at the end of the day?" In fact, though, he was not overly concerned about being fired, noting that Clinton adviser Bruce Lindsey had told him, "The President wants you taken care of" with "a job and health insurance and all that."

Nevertheless, stated glbtq activist Keith Boykin, who also served in the Clinton administration, Hattoy was always "getting in trouble just for speaking the truth."

One such occasion occurred when Hattoy was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that he "almost started crying" when Clinton--in a news conference following the uproar concerning his attempt to lift the ban on openly gay members of the military that culminated in the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy--referred to the possibility of segregating military troops by sexual orientation.

White House personnel, including press secretary Dee Dee Myers and spokesman George Stephanopoulos, chastised him for criticizing the President and for being "off-message," but Clinton, Hattoy stated, was annoyed that in his comments he had specifically mentioned homophobic Georgia Senator Sam Nunn, who strongly opposed allowing gay men and lesbians to serve in the military. Clinton felt that the statement by a member of his staff violated an agreement that he had with Nunn not to criticize each other publicly for six months (one that Hattoy said that Nunn had already breached).

Despite the moments of friction, Hattoy remained convinced of Clinton's good intentions, and he was pleased to be present at an "amazing meeting" arranged by Boykin in April 1993 at which Clinton received eight leaders of glbtq rights organizations at the White House for a discussion of issues of importance to the community.

Hattoy stated in 1994 that "we do have people, both in Bill and Hillary Clinton, who care profoundly for people with AIDS. But nothing's going to change until we change the attitudes in every other house in America." The scope of the problem was made evident regularly in the mail that he received from people across the country who were either struggling to provide AIDS education and services or had been victims of discrimination.

"We can't . . . forget that people are being bombed, beaten to death, losing their jobs, their houses, their families, their children because they have this virus. And I don't know those people, but I know they're out there, and I have to fight for them."

Hattoy was disappointed by how long it took the administration to appoint an "AIDS czar" and by the eventual choice of Kristine Gebbie, of whom he said, "I feel she doesn't have a sense of vision or an action plan."

Sadly, he concluded, "I think the AIDS community is going to have to do things on their own."

In 1994 Hattoy was transferred to the Department of the Interior, where he remained until 1999, when he returned to California to work as a political consultant.

In 2002 Governor Gray Davis appointed Hattoy to the state Fish & Game Commission. He took on the job with his usual energy and enthusiasm, and in February 2007 he was elected Commission chairman.

A scant month later, on March 4, 2007, Hattoy died from complications of AIDS. Tributes poured in for his work as an activist for both glbtq rights and the environment.

Carl Pope of the Sierra Club declared, "I think that his greatest environmental legacy is the California coastline. When President Reagan proposed opening the shoreline to drilling, Mr. Hattoy formed a coalition of people and organizations to oppose the plan. He was the human force that pulled everyone together."

Eric Sawyer, one of the founders of ACT UP, praised Hattoy's dedication in fighting AIDS. "Bob was one of the few insiders who was consistently vocal on behalf of people with AIDS, on what was the true situation of people with AIDS--what the real needs were--and he wasn't afraid to criticize."

Hattoy had stipulated to friends that he did not want a funeral; rather, he requested that they preserve his ashes in a martini shaker and hold celebrations of his life in Los Angeles, Sacramento, New York City, and Washington, D.C.

At the memorial gathering at the United States Capitol in April 2007, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi offered a tribute, declaring, "For the environment, Bob was a force for nature. As an activist, he was a force of nature."

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