

BOB HATTOY

GAY RIGHTS PIONEER

b. November 1, 1950

d. March 4, 2007

He was the first openly gay person to address the Democratic National Convention on prime-time TV.

“Mr. President, your family has AIDS ... and you are doing nothing about it.”

Bob Hattoy was a pioneering HIV/AIDS, LGBT rights and environmental activist. The New York Times called him “the first gay man with AIDS many Americans had knowingly laid eyes on.” His arresting speech at the 1992 Democratic convention brought national attention to the AIDS epidemic, when the government was sweeping it under the rug.

Robert Keith Hattoy was born in Providence, Rhode Island. His family moved to Long Beach, California, when he was a teenager. Despite an abusive father and an otherwise difficult home life, Hattoy grew into a witty, outgoing and influential young man.

Though he never completed a degree, Hattoy attended several colleges and universities. Motivated by his passion for the environment, he turned his talents toward public policy. He worked under Zev Yaroslavsky, a Los Angeles city councilman, where he focused on environmental initiatives and rent control.

In 1981, after a stint on Yaroslavsky’s staff, Hattoy took a job with the Sierra Club, where he remained for the next decade. Founded by the naturalist John Muir, the Sierra Club was reputedly run by “an austere bunch of mountaineers.” Hattoy breathed new life into the organization with his charisma and the power of his convictions.

In 1992 Hattoy joined Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign. Shortly thereafter, he discovered a lump under his arm and was diagnosed with AIDS-related lymphoma. Hattoy told Clinton, and Clinton urged him to speak publicly about the epidemic.

Ten days later, still shell-shocked by his diagnosis, Hattoy addressed the Democratic National Convention in a nationally televised speech. Calling out the presidential incumbent, George H.W. Bush, Hattoy declared the gay community “part of the American family.” “Mr. President,” he said, “your family has AIDS, and we are dying, and you are doing nothing about it.”

After Bill Clinton’s election, Hattoy served in the White House Office of Personnel. He was an outspoken critic of the environmental policies of previous administrations and found Clinton’s policies similarly lacking. In 1994 the Clinton administration moved Hattoy to the Interior Department as White House liaison on environmental matters. He remained there for five years. He also served as the research committee chairman of the Presidential Commission on HIV/AIDS.

In 2002 Hattoy took a position with the California Fish and Game Commission. He became its president in 2007, shortly before his death.

Hattoy died at age 56 in Sacramento, California, from complications of AIDS.



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