A Conference Of Their Own

October 1, 2000 By Diane Peters

"Are we supposed to believe to be carrying a sign or something?" one woman whispers to another in the confused, but calm throng. We're standing outside in the main conference room at Wyndham Bristol Place, a hotel just outside of Toronto and the site of Canada's first National Conference on Women & HIV/AIDS last spring. This particular event, a protest asking the Canadian government and drug companies to fund more women-specific research, does not appear on the four-day schedule. It's been pulled together by two women living with HIV, Louise Binder and Janet Conners, co-chairs of the Canadian Treatments Advocates Council. Binder, a short, curvy woman with blond hair and funky, colored glasses, grabs a megaphone.

"We're dying for some research," she says. "Dying for it." A crowd lines the hotel corridors, watching aloofly as they sip coffee. The marchers seem timid, almost embarrassed, except for Binder and Conners. 'We want action now," they repeat, voices high with passion. A twinge of anger rises from the protesters, then fades again.

I can't figure out why the conference—the majority women and service providers with HIV—seem so lackluster. At seminar sessions, we talk about prostitution, drug abuse, sexual abuse, pregnancy, disclosure, racism, microbides, negotiating condom use and lack of services for aboriginal women with HIV. Brave women stand up and tell their personal stories. It's painfully obvious that women, who make up 25% of the new infections in Canada, are not getting the support and treatment that they need.

As my blood boils, the audience offers quiet attention and polite applause. The women barely peep until breaks; when they chat with others, fill their plates hungrily fro the snack tables and leisurely move on to the next workshop. 'It's not so much about learning, it's more like validating and sharing," a woman later tells me. Perhaps the women who don't take the podium are just as angry and frustrated. But they choose to fight back by networking over croissants and hushed conversations in the hallways. They will bring about change by swapping lubricant samples and phone umbers. "Not every women sees herself as an advocate or activist," Binder admits.

Still not everyone simmers quietly. "Janet and I know that part of our role is just being very loud," Binder says. They open the event, close it, hold a press conference and power the protest. And here and there other loud voices chime in. One woman from Vancouver steals the spotlight during the press conference when she pleads for help in making condoms a safe option prostitutes. A Calgary woman with HIV angrily tells me how service providers' discussion dominated every session while she and other positive women never had their life-or-death questions answered.

Now, months later, Binder, Conners and other organizers continue to conference's quiet work. They're sifting through hundreds of recommendations written by attendees for publication. Next May, Binder and her colleagues plan to hold a press conference to publicize what has not been done in Canada. "We don't plan to let this list of recommendations just languish," Binder asserts. A year after that, she hopes there will be another conference. "You don't get change by awareness alone," Binder says. "We just drew a blueprint."

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