All Our Children

Is American television ready for HIV positive characters to give birth? Tune in tomorrow...

May 1, 2007 By Kellee Terrell

Rumors are swirling IN soap opera magazines and on *General Hospital* fansites that the ABC serial will soon launch a pregnancy storyline for its HIV positive heroine, Dr. Robin Scorpio. Talk about great expectations: GH would become the first daytime drama to address HIV and pregnancy. “This is something our fan base has wanted for a long time,” says Amy Beard, spokesperson for Scrubs, a fan blog tracking Scorpio and her HIV negative boyfriend, playboy-doctor Patrick Drake.

Scrubs, which has no HIV affiliation, has posted banners on its site to lobby the show; it’s even considering an HIV-related ad in *Variety* to encourage the plot twist.

General Hospital head writer Robert Guza Jr. sparked the obsessive speculation last December, when he told *Soaps in Depth* magazine, “I do very much intend to tell the story of an HIV positive woman who decides to get pregnant.” *General Hospital* publicist Mitchell Messinger, however, refuses to pinpoint if and when the story will debut. And although Kimberly McCullough, the actress who has played Robin on and off since 1985, wouldn’t confirm the rumor either, she told *Soaps in Depth*, “It’s nothing new that positive women can have negative babies.”

Pregnancy is hardly new to the HIV community, just as HIV is no stranger to serials, especially on ABC. Over the past 20 years, all of its hour-long soaps—*All My Children*, *One Life to Live* and *General Hospital*—have had groundbreaking HIV stories. “Shows give a face to the disease,” says Tamilu Waite, Soapcentral.com’s *GH* columnist. “We don’t look at Robin as being ‘HIV [the virus],’ but someone living with HIV we can learn from.”

Because the program airs daily, it offers its 3 million viewers an especially deep emotional connection to the characters—and an ideal medium for HIV education. In 1999, the Centers for Disease Control reported that 50% of all TV viewers assimilated medical facts from shows. And those who fear that HIV’s a ratings-killing downer need only spin the globe. South Africa’s *Soul City* soap and Cambodia’s *Taste of Life* have fused positive characters and HIV info into the soap formula of love, deceit and greed, teaching viewers about everything from prevention to testing.

Waite hopes that if *GH* does deliver, its writers will listen to real HIV positive mothers. Powwows between networks and people living with HIV are increasing. This season, when *CSI: New York* introduced an HIV storyline, *POZ* hosted a web forum where the show’s creators and viewers could

interact with the HIV community. But can such connection avert sensationalized stories like, say, meth heads spreading a “superstrain” or victim wives infected by duplicitous, desperate down-low husbands?

CBS, LOGO and the defunct UPN network have peppered shows with quasi-authentic HIV plotlines and public service announcements. Yet many positive characters appear only in forgettable guest roles. The characters who *have* found their way onto *Noah’s Arc*, *Queer as Folk* and *Commander in Chief* have been gay, so their HIV status might seem less shocking than if the character were, say, Patrick Dempsey’s on *Grey’s Anatomy*. If *Grey’s* can force “McDreamy” into the vernacular, think what it could do with a positive heterosexual role.

Granted, TV shows, especially soaps, are sensationalized, which means Robin’s Friday cliffhanger will probably have her giving birth in an elevator dangling from a cable on the 50th floor. Wouldn’t it be refreshing if, for once, we worried not whether mom and baby survived HIV—but whether they survived the fall?

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