Ana Gets Analyzed

April 1, 2000 By Kevin O'Leary

After a pile of PR problems, including a staff walkout, signaled the end of Joshua Lipsman's 10 months as executive director of New York City's Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the mammoth agency found its new leader, Ana Oliveira, in its own ranks. The Brazilian-born cancer survivor, 47, brought her rep in the Latina and lesbian communities to GMHC in 1996 after more than a decade of HIV work with IV-drug users (IDUs) in the Bronx and Queens. POZ chatted with the swamped—and flu-struck—E.D. just after the release of New York Gov. George Pataki proposed a $6 million cut from the state's HIV budget.

POZ: What do you make of Pataki's proposed cut?

Oliveira: It's unconscionable. But the governor has a 30-day period to amend the budget, and we're networking with other groups to make that happen.

Like Housing Works? They've gotten a rep as a renegade AIDS organization…
I am having dinner with them tomorrow night. We don't specifically have one thing in mind that we will do together, but they're effective in their advocacy and have won some very important lawsuits this past year. GMHC lost the financial support of many gay men who'd been there at the beginning.

How are you wooing them?
It is true that in the last year and a half we were not able to maintain the kind of quality relationships with a significant part of our donor base that we used to. We all have been working on reconnecting. We're also producing an annual report that is—how can I say this?—more impressive and informative than it's been in the past.

You've been at GMHC for years and started the women's department. Can you make budget decisions that may end programs you helped create?
I've been through three or four cuts already here. There's not much of a winning thing about it, ever. But what I feel now is different. Yes, it's more responsibility, but there is also the ability now to make a real difference.

Any drastic cuts or layoffs imminent?
No. We are starting the second part of our fiscal year, and so far we have been very successful at maintaining our expenses either at or below our expected levels. We're also thinking of renting out some floors in our building. This would be an enormous expense reduction, and we're considering

candidates.

Will the Morning Party, which was canceled due to drug controversies, return?
Let me say this: We would have to begin discussions at all levels to do that. Honestly, you are the first to ask me about it. So I am at least on schedule there [laughs].

You've gotten great press after all of GMHC's bad coverage in the past year—especially after the staff walked out on Lipsman. How's morale now?
There's a whole new feeling in this building. The reason is communication. Honesty. Directness. Now at every staff meeting they get an update—a financial update. Even during that difficult time last year, we had to push to have that occur. As we engage in conversations around what GMHC's role must be in the epidemic, at a minimum we will involve the staff in those conversations. There aren't any closed doors here.

So you're management now. But you started as an acupuncturist treating the IDU community. What lessons do you bring to your desk job?
The need to focus on people's strengths and work with them as survivors. That is how you develop and chart your destiny. GMHC needs to stand from its strengths, not its weaknesses. It is there in the survival of the clients. We can be a partner to that.

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