Arch Enemies

The other ACT UP has declared war on the entire AIDS community. Martin Delaney, a veteran of their violence, is mad as hell and he's not going to take it anymore.

August 1, 2000 By Martin Delaney

San Francisco long ago lost patience with these clowns, who have violently disrupted AIDS events for almost a decade. Their escapades include pouring feces-and-urine-laden cat litter on San Francisco AIDS Foundation head Pat Christen, launching attacks on the Stop AIDS Project (a gay HIV prevention group), even crashing PI's annual fundraising dinner and overturning tables of PWAs. And they routinely ambush people on the street (often women from our staff), shoving, shouting and spitting. Such big, brave boys!

We were all fed up, and at the STI forum, the audience was ready to rip off heads. When PI's Judy Leahy tried to intervene, she was knocked to the ground by David Pasquarelli, the group's self-appointed intellectual kingpin. Though he insists that the event didn't happen, photos, hospital records and police reports say otherwise. In May, charges of misdemeanor trespassing were finally brought against him and three other ACT UP/SFers; a restraining order was also issued, requiring them to stay 100 yards away from any PI staff.

Has San Francisco gone nuts? Or is it just a few troublemakers who have taken root? Virtually all other AIDS activists have condemned violence, especially against PWAs. It's extremely unsettling to find oneself the object of ACT UP/SF's bloodcurdling hatred, as it's hard to know when they or their hangers-on might pull out a weapon in a frenzy. It makes you wonder: If they truly believe their enemies are murderers, where will the violence end?

What motivates their terrorist tactics? They blame it on a general "censorship" of their "HIV-is-harmless, pharmaceutical-drugs-are-poison" mantra. This dangerous dalliance with Peter Duesberg has led them to collaborate with the likes of congress member Tom "Kill the Ryan White Act" Coburn and attack the "fraud" of funding for ASOs and research. How any sane mind can take such steps while thinking itself the savior of the gay community is a mystery. That science finds no merit in their HIV denial, that their AIDS-is-a-hoax position can only lead to more infections, that their "don't get tested, don't take treatment" message results in people getting sick and dying—none of this seems to matter to them. Like many HIV denialists, they confuse the question of whether HIV causes AIDS with whether it has caused AIDS in themselves yet. Their HIV—several claim to be positive—may be behind their denial and their promotion of barebacking, reopening the baths and other dubious pursuits.

The May 4 Bay Area Reporter announced that ACT UP/SF had purchased a corner-storefront, four-apartment building, financed by one Robert Leppo, who also contributes to Republican Party campaigns. A small ACT UP chapter buying real estate on Market Street in the Castro? While not illegal, it's at least hypocritical for a group that condemns everyone else as "AIDS, Inc." and claims the rest of us are getting rich off the epidemic. No other activist group owns an $800,000 property in a trust in its employees' names.

But ACT UP/SF's antics aren't about activism or AIDS. Should these bullies spit on you, you wouldn't think they deserved tolerance. There's room for different opinions, strategies, even beliefs—but not for violence against PWAs, disruption of others' work and homophobia (one of their war-cries that night was "Die, you faggots"). What PWAs need is a safe space and respect—exactly what we've fought to get from the public and the government. It's ironic—and very sad—to close the second decade of AIDS defending ourselves against the enemy within when we've come so far in taming the enemy without.

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