Censored Secretions

Charles Perez tries to stem River's flow

April 1, 1996 By River Huston

I've always believed that if TV stations had run AIDS prevention messages across the bottom of the screen -- you know, the kind they have for hurricane warnings -- we could have made a major dent in the epidemic. So when a producer called me from *The Charles Perez Show*, I decided against my better judgment to listen to what he had to say.

The producer needed a sex expert for a show on discordant couples (a relationship in which one person is HIV positive and the other is HIV negative). The segment's goal, so he said, was to show the audience that people with HIV are "still datable." I thought, Great, I get to go on TV and finally be candid about sexuality. What was I thinking?

They seemed excited that I agreed. First they promised me I could warm up the audience with a little basic AIDS education. I was allotted 15 minutes to talk about transmission, which excited me to no end: I was going to get to say penis and vaginal secretions on TV. We talked on the phone numerous times. They sent me profiles of all the guests. They insisted this was going to be an educational program. I believed them.

When I arrived, I learned I could not hold my simulated penis. Herman, the executive producer, actually told me, "You can cut someone's head off or pull out their internal organs and smear them across the stage but you cannot show that thing on daytime TV." What? Then I was informed that I would not be doing the warm-up. "Herman is doing the warm-up because he always does the warm-ups."

Herman's talk did not include AIDS education, but it was peppered with incendiary remarks such as "I guess this gives the term 'gay divorcée a whole new meaning" when referring to some of the other guests.

Speaking of guests, sweet though they were, it seemed the producers had searched diligently to find the most uneducated or confrontational people they could. Take the couple from Colorado, Bob and Lynn, who were together for awhile, then separated when Lynn, pregnant, tested positive. Bob later returned, and they were married when the baby turned out HIV negative. They announced, proudly giggling, how they had had unsafe sex just the previous night. They were invited to the show so Bob could bugle that he knew he'd never get HIV because he didn't have oral or vaginal sex with Lynn while she was on her period. The audience was incensed.

I am not here to judge what people do in their sex lives. We all take risks in life. It was their reasoning that most frustrated me. Bob: “You get married so you can have unsafe sex!” He completely confused me when, in the same breath, he announced he would die for his wife and then proclaimed that he couldn’t get HIV because he hadn’t gotten it after three years! (He also had a tendency to applaud whenever the audience did, even when they were saying horrible things about the couple’s behavior. It made me wonder whether we were dealing with double-digit IQs).

As an expert, I tried to explain transmission rates from women to men and the amount of viral particles in vaginal secretions compared to those in semen. Charles had to cut me off: “You’re way over everyone’s head, River.”

Sheniqua and Harold were next. Sheniqua was pregnant and positive. Harold was negative and supporting Sheniqua’s choice to have the baby. The audience was very opinionated about this, and so was Sheniqua. We went in circles until we were elevated to that coveted talk-show state: The audience was screaming for sterilization and Sheniqua was screaming back, “This is my baby and I’ll have it if I want to!” Audience hands were waving; butts were edging off the seats.

As expert, I tried to explain that separate studies showed that vitamin A and AZT could dramatically reduce mother-to-child transmission. I had no sooner begun to talk about the wonderful diagnostic possibilities of Q-PCR when Charles yelled, “Cut, cut!” Scowling at me, he whined, “No one understands what you’re talking about.” When I got to prenatal care, I was shooed away again.

The last guest, Kevin, HIV positive, believed that positive people should date only positive people.

The discordant couples went wild. “What about reinfection?!” they howled. I tried to explain there has never been such a study and no one really believed in the reinfection theory. I sure never have. Of course I only got the first sentence out before I was cut off by La Perez.

I know I educated the support staff. The limo driver was certainly informed after we had an impromptu conversation about eroticizing safer sex. But I am saddened that we cannot talk intelligently on television about sex and HIV transmission.

I was supposed to be on the Bob Berkowitz show, *Real Personal*, where I know I could be frank, but it was just canceled. Why am I surprised? Then again, *The Charles Perez Show* was canceled just a week after I guested. Guess I got the last laugh after all.

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