Cosmo Confessions

When the plague stepped into HGB's parlor

June 1, 1998 By Rossi

Helen Gurley Brown (HGB), senior authority on sex and the single girl and firm believer in the transcendent value of well-toned thighs, may seem like the type of girl who would thrill at hearing her name chanted by a crowd. But you can bet the empress of *Cosmopolitan* took no such joy when, on a bitter January afternoon in 1988, 300 lesbian-led activists stampeded the glossy's midtown Manhattan offices shouting, "Murderer of women! We want Helen Gurley Brown!"

The demo was ACT UP/New York's answer to an article by psychiatrist Robert Gould in that month's *Cosmo*. At a crucial time in HIV prevention, "Reassuring News About AIDS (A Doctor Tells Why You May Not Be At Risk)" offered little proof for such big pronouncements as: "There is hardly any danger of contracting AIDS through ordinary sexual intercourse."

Gould, who in 1973 helped strike homosexuality from the shrinks' list of illnesses, could not have predicted such reader response. Outrage at the general inattention to the then 8 percent of all PWAs who were women, coupled with the article's "AIDS ain't us" assumptions, prompted ACT UPers to form the Women's Caucus. "In 1988, women with HIV weren't paid attention to except as mothers," says cofounder Marion Banzhaf. "There was a lot of scapegoating of sex workers and drug addicts, and the predominant thinking was: That was how you got AIDS if you were female. Gould's message reinforced that."

The demo was the fledgling fighters' first *sans* permit. Maxine Wolfe recalls it as a cat-and-mouse game with New York City's finest. "The cops were expecting us at the parent company's Hearst Building—but we set up outside *Cosmo* headquarters, chanting, picketing and handing out leaflets reading 'Don't Go to Bed With *Cosmo*.' When the police realized their mistake, we moved to Hearst, a few blocks away." For HGB, lunchtime that day must have been worse than getting caught wearing white after Labor Day.

"We were juiced for that action," Banzhaf says. "We also mailed hundreds of condoms directly to Helen Gurley Brown." The Women's Caucus asked Brown to print a retraction. She refused. *The New York Post* printed her only public utterance: "We knew it was a controversial article. That's why we spent weeks researching and rechecking every detail."

After providing evidence to refute his theory, the Women's Caucus also pumped Gould for a

retraction. He wouldn't budge. Caucus member Jean Carlomusto videotaped the group's sitdown with Gould at his home, and along with demo footage, made the video *Doctors, Liars and Women*. "Gould's only concern was for his nervous clients, who were afraid to have sex!" says Wolfe. "His line was, if a woman tells you she got HIV from 'ordinary' vaginal sex, she's a liar. That's how we got the title for the video." In the post-demo flap, the ACT UP gals found themselves relegated to spectators as Gould peddled his position on *Nightline*, *Donahue* and *People Are Talking*.

While Brown never did apologize, two months later *Cosmo* ran its first-ever piece advocating condoms for safer sex. In the decade since, the mag has published a stack of epidemiologically accurate AIDS-related articles. Meanwhile, the proportion of female AIDS cases has soared to 28 percent. Flipping through a recent issue, one can read such timely tales as "I Gave Him My Love and He Gave Me HIV," about a woman who helped convict her ex-boyfriend of knowingly exposing her to the virus.

As for Gould, who died of a brain tumor in February, the controversy ended his brief tenure as AIDS expert and permanently blotted his reputation. At Gould's memorial service, recalls longtime AIDS activist Richard Berkowitz, only one speaker dared even to mention this lifelong liberal's contribution to the gay community. Gould's bad rap galls Berkowitz. "Dr. Robert Gould will always be one of my heroes for his trailblazing efforts—as a psychiatrist and an author—to recognize lesbians and gay men as part of the human family," he says. "He even testified on behalf of lesbian mothers in child custody cases when few peers had the courage. Downplaying the risk AIDS poses to women was reprehensible, but it saddens me to see his many contributions erased by one unfortunate article. History will show we've all made mistakes trying to sort out the truth of the epidemic. I hope it also shows we can forgive."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Cosmo-Confessions-7133-9692