Don’t Call Him ‘Poster Boy’

Moises didn’t know how to dance. For a Puerto Rican, that is worse than death.

May 1, 1997 By Degen Pener

He has left his coat at home. As the chief treatment advocate for the National Minority AIDS Council, Moisés Agosto has been working Washington for four years, long enough to know better than to wait on line at coat check. He thus dives directly into the swim of the Triangle Ball, the glad-handing gay benefit held last January to celebrate President Clinton’s second inauguration. Agosto is soon in the grip of the VIP room, where a group of gay Clintonites, Hill wonks, activists and big-money donors -- unmoved by the excitement of Chita Rivera in the main ballroom -- networks tirelessly.

They all drown Agosto in superlatives. “He has access to everyone,” says Steve Morin, a senior legislative assistant to House appropriations committee member Nancy Pelosi.

“He has this incredible spirit. Everyone who works in AIDS knows Moisés,” says Winnie Stackelberg, the Human Rights Campaign’s legislative director. “Please,” says one AIDS advocate, “he is the diva of schmooze.”

Not long after midnight, a thoroughly swabbed Agosto is ready to leave. On his way out with his handsome boyfriend, Chet Holcomb, he stops to chat up a couple more beltway friends in the hotel lobby. As he coolly smokes a cigarette, his no-coat foresight is paying off. Royally. Around the corner, the coat check is in chaos. Women are shrieking for their furs. The ridiculously long line stamps and sweats with impatience. And a contingent begins chanting -- “What do we want? Our coats! When do we want them? Right now!” -- like the members of ACT UP that some of them, like Agosto, used to be.

It is not until two and a half hours later, near three in the morning, that the last in line finally have their wraps. By then, Agosto has already been home in bed for a couple of hours. His tuxedo has been hung up. And he’d like the glamour of his story to be shelved too. “Some people say I’m a poster boy,” he told me earlier that evening. “I really can care less about that.”

In short, Moisés Agosto is quite a package. In him there is a principled political animal, a proud Puerto Rican and a fun-loving party boy. He is also a published poet. Just 31 years old, he has been a semiotics student, a grass-roots community worker, an enraged activist and a Spanish-language magazine editor. Warm laughter rolls off of him continuously, except at those times when there seems to be a defenseless, earnest boy peering out of those big baby-blues. But above everything

else, he is a person whose life has been remade by AIDS.

Two years ago, he came close to dying, so much so that he was even telling good friends what to do with his belongings if he passed on. But before that drama, AIDS twice led Agosto to pick up and leave behind both his home and his family. In 1986 he found out that he had HIV. That discovery prompted him to say goodbye to San Juan, where he had grown up in a working-class neighborhood. “At that time in Puerto Rico, it was horrible. I had no insurance or possibility of health care,” says Agosto, who moved to New York on a scholarship for graduate studies in Latin American literature at SUNY-Stonybrook. “I finally hooked up with CHP, Community Health Project, so that was my way to get health care.”

The second move, to DC, came when he was 27. By that time, Agosto had long since abandoned academia. He had volunteered or worked at a host of organizations: ACT UP, the AIDS Treatment Data Network(ATDN), the People With AIDS Coalition (PWAC) and Treatment Action Group (TAG). And he had become something of a sorely overworked and underpaid one-man institution on treatment issues for people of color.

“He called me to complain about the fact that there was a lack of treatment education and to hold me accountable,” says Paul Kawata, the executive director of the National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC). “Then I said, ’If I find the money, will you make this happen?’” Kawata found it, and Agosto headed south to create the organization’s treatment advocacy and education division. He knew he’d miss the family of friends he’d forged in New York getting arrested at die-ins and other protests.

And Washington loomed ahead of him. “I remember trying to talk him out of moving. That was a struggle for him,” his friend Mark Aurigemma, a public relations consultant, says. What Agosto gained was a national base to fight for the access he once hurt for.

“Moisés is one of the few -- absolutely few, like maybe three or four -- people of color who inserted themselves into issues around research and treatment,” says Mario Cooper, a public relations consultant and the former chair of the AIDS Action Council. “He pioneered the field,” adds Agosto’s friend Mario Solis-Marich, CEO of the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention.

As Agosto -- with a voice that is dramatic, smooth as caramel, still accented -- discusses research activism, the sea of acronyms he moves through and the myriad issues he is on top of prove dizzying. Here is just a sampling: Drug trials that once seemed to be the exclusive province of gay white men have opened up partly because of Agosto’s work. “The idea of outreach to people of color met with a lot of resistance. The line we were given at the time was that this is about science and not about social programming,” says Solis-Marich. “Today it’s part of the protocol.”

Besides creating the National AIDS Treatment Advocates Forum, he started a high-profile campaign aimed at Latinos starring Patti Labelle to promote PCP prophylaxis. He is a poster boy in it, but he’s quick to point out the role wasn’t by design. “That was going to be Pedro Zamora,” explains Agosto. “The day we were shooting, he called to say he had PCP and couldn’t come. My boss said, ’You speak Spanish. You do it.’” The PCP ads are just one part of the work he does

translating densely scientific information in a way that is accessible to people of color. “We have too many treatment newsletters. I mean, it’s pretty nice to be a treatment nerd, but honey, if you don’t mingle with the people, what’s the point?” says Agosto, who has a habit of abruptly skipping between numbing political jargon and camp expression.

And with the recent advent of godawful-expensive triple combination therapies, his job puts him at the center of perhaps the most formidable challenge in fighting AIDS now. “If we start people earlier and earlier in treatment, what that will mean is a lot of people would not progress from HIV infection to an AIDS case definition. They therefore would not become disabled and eligible for SSI and Medicaid. That puts all the pressure back on the Ryan White fund,” says Steve Morin of Rep. Pelosi’s office. “It is critically important that people of color be at the table in these discussions. Moisés does an excellent job raising those concerns.”

Yes, the list goes on. One wonders how Agosto balances all the competing demands from working so deep inside the system. At the same time that he’s trying to secure access to treatment for people of color, he needs to keep his political access open, too. Most associates say he’s brilliant at working flexibly with everyone from the federal government to drug companies to other treatment advocates without losing sight of his convictions.

“He knows who he is. If you can be the same with the CEO of Glaxo as you are with pregnant women living with the virus, then you are a pretty amazing human being,” says Paul Kawata. Adds Victor Zonana, deputy assistant secretary of Health and Human Services, “He’s kept his integrity and held our feet to the fire while working within the system.”

Of course, such praise, or for that matter kind words from Secretary Shalala’s office, doesn’t endear him to everyone. Some feel that Agosto, who served on Shalala’s National Task Force on AIDS Drugs, does get too caught up in the scene. “It’s a difficult call. Does he do it as much as other people have? Nothing compared to the boys at TAG,” says Mario Cooper. But others are less circumspect. “I never saw Moisés putting himself on the line or really risking his skin,” says César Carrasco, a psychotherapist and former member of ACT UP’s Latino caucus. “He is basically an AIDS career person. He plays safe.” Some also say that Agosto has an arrogant tendency to dismiss ideas he decides are wrong.

Agosto, for his part, claims to be on constant ego alert. “I always said that the worst opportunistic infection that we have in this epidemic is ego,” he says. “I think that maybe I just put my ego as a human being into my writing. So that I don’t fuck up these other things that are important.”

He doesn’t view having access as a problem. “What we did in ACT UP was great, but I see the AIDS movement as this big thing that had to evolve. You can be a fierce activist, but in order to get things done, you have to know how to play politics,” he says. He even laughs when I point out the apparent contradiction hanging on his bedroom wall. A framed invite to Clinton’s first inauguration is nailed nearly above a photo of Agosto in full protest regalia. He is shirtless, in the skimpiest of shorts, holding a Pinocchio-faced poster of the President that reads *Mentirosa* (Liar). “You know I love that,” he says of the contradiction. “People expect you to be either white or black, and I’m not

like that and I don't want to be like that."

The gray area of his ethnicity is another matter entirely. He often speaks out against gay white male dominance of the treatment movement. "At the start, the core of people doing treatment advocacy was a very closed elitist group of mostly white gay males," says Agosto. "That was the beginning of my mission, to make sure that those doors are open for these other communities." At the same time, he's aware that being a light-skinned and incredibly handsome Puerto Rican opens doors for him. "I notice that people are comfortable with me, and I work it. I think I do it because it has helped me to have access and bring issues to the table. To a certain extent, though, I am not proud of it. I have seen how other people get excluded, and I think that's sad."

Growing up in Puerto Rico, however, Agosto was anything but smooth. His parents raised him in a religious sect, Congregación Mita, that cut itself off from the outside world. Its leader, who is proclaimed a prophet, named Moisés after the original biblical big gun. (It is pronounced Moi-sess; now imagine Anne Baxter saying that to Charlton Heston three times fast.) "People don't know about that part of my background," he says.

A clutch of rules was rigidly enforced: No visits to the beach. No girlfriends. No movies before 18. No masturbation. No theater. "The prophet found out we were going to the theater, but we convinced him he was wrong," Agosto says.

By the time he was a teenager, that environment had left Moisés a spectacular nerd. And not just because he played French horn in the school band. "He always wore these big oversize overalls with a white cap and these T-shirts that I don't know where he found them," says his friend Mayra Santos, a writer who was Agosto's college girlfriend. "He couldn't drink a beer. And he didn't know how to dance. For a Puerto Rican, that is worse than death."

Once he came out of the closet, a transformation began. "He was always concerned with fashion, and his hair was wonderful," Santos says. Even so, his move to the States severely tested his confidence. "That was very difficult for him," she says. "A lot of people don't understand how different Puerto Rico and the United States are. Also, he was going there alone and with HIV. And he had always lived with his family."

After he got to graduate school, he landed a job in the Bronx teaching English to Latinas who were illiterate even in Spanish. He also began talking to them about AIDS, disclosing his HIV status and bringing in occasional speakers. It was there that he first saw how treatment information wasn't filtering down. One day, when his talks on prevention weren't going over well, he switched gears and spoke about how he looked after his own health. "Five women started to cry and that was telling me something was going on right there," Agosto says.

In Manhattan, meanwhile, he found his way to his first ACT UP meeting. "It was like a religious experience," he says. "I was in a room full of people my age, HIV positive, with an attitude of 'We are going to make changes.' It was an attitude I wanted to have. And a lot of them were very cute." He volunteered as a translator. His extracurricular activity was soon taking up every one of his nights. "I dropped school," he says.

Soon his days became devoted to AIDS, too. He quit his job in the Bronx to work for the AIDS Treatment Data Network and later as editor of PWAC's *Sida Ahora*. The pay was scarce. "He and I would sit around for months and months planning programs," says ATDN's executive director Ken Fornataro, "while trying to figure out how we were going to get money for lunch." In 1990, he even moved back to Puerto Rico for six months to help launch an ACT UP chapter on the island. "It was so incredibly stigmatized there," says his friend Darren Britten, the administrative director of the AIDS center at New York City's St. Claire's Hospital and one in a group of activists who went there with Moisés. "He was the first person on the island to come out as gay and HIV positive."

All the while, his romantic life, or at least his sex life, flourished. "He was a tramp. He was a whore. He had relationships. He fucked people over. He let people fuck him over. He did it all," says his boyfriend Chet. When I tell Agosto that more than a few of my own friends told me they've slept with him, he coolly deadpans, "Jane Silver didn't say that... did she?" But after a couple of particularly sour relationships, Agosto quit the dating scene. "I didn't have a serious boyfriend for five years," he says. "It was just sex, very practical."

Which, for this workaholic, was just fine, at least until two years ago when he got sick. "I had 25 T-cells, not much to play with," he says. "I was very depressed about the fact that I was going to die alone." His parents -- who have moved a long way forward over the years in embracing their son as a gay man with AIDS -- came to Washington. That's when, because of one of his family's religious customs, he worried about what would happen to his belongings. "When people die within the congregation," says Mayra Santos, "everything they have is burned. He was very concerned his family would take over all his stuff, his clippings, his articles and just throw them into the garbage. I was supposed to be there to take these things and keep them." He was also troubled that he hadn't yet fulfilled himself as a writer. "I want to be remembered," he says. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Protease inhibitors staved off those scenarios. But the mortal sketch seems to have brought about a change in Agosto. "I want to make sure that I do what I wanted to do with my life." So last November, he worked out an arrangement with NMAC that allows him to work from New York, the first move in his life that hasn't been driven by fighting AIDS. After eight months together, he and Chet, who is also HIV positive, found an apartment in Chelsea. Both claim never to have had a fight. That presumably allows him more time to write poetry. (His first book, *Poems of Immune Logic*, was published in Spanish in 1991 by Publi-visiones Pons, Inc.; a second collection of poems, *Instantaneous*, is being considered for publication by the University of Puerto Rico Press.)

And he is slowly pulling back a bit from his work, although all thoughts of retiring when he was sick are now gone. "If he dropped it, he would just go fucking bananas," Chet says.

"I'm taking my life back again," says Agosto. That might even include taking up his old French horn again. As Moisés himself himself might say about that, Oh, honey.
