Don’t Reign on Her Parade

Miss America 1998 gets the point

March 1, 1998 By Dominic Hamilton-Little

They call her the grittiest Miss America yet. And according to the AIDS Action Council, she has “shattered every ugly stereotype about Miss America.” All Miss Americas make the front page, but the current queen, Kate Shindle, has more to offer than beauty secrets. Kate has followed in the footsteps of Miss America 1993, Leanza Cornett, by championing AIDS education, but she’s gone a few steps further. Initially annoying activists with her opposition to needle exchange, she has since exercised her woman’s prerogative by coming out in support of them. Kate and I chatted about her change of heart, her favorite AIDS activists and if she’s ever had unsafe sex. Judges -- the envelope, please.

Dominic Hamilton-Little: You changed your position on needle exchange.

Kate Shindle: At first I thought needle exchange would encourage drug use, but there was no shortage of people trying to convince me otherwise. Having looked at it more closely, and seeing how it helps reduce transmission rates and provides opportunities for drug counseling, I changed my mind.

And you’ve since visited Baltimore’s west-side syringe swap.

I was amazed. It’s a one-for-one exchange and there were six huge buckets filled with dirty needles. They have had a 40 percent reduction in seropositivity rates.

Have you encountered negativity for your pro-needle exchange stance and for advocating condom distribution in schools?

Absolutely. Lots of people think Miss America shouldn’t discuss sex, condoms and needle exchange. But we all have to come to terms with our own morality, and this is something I believe in. Although it did not come from a desire to be controversial, the controversy is good because it gets people talking -- and silence is still our greatest enemy. It is so strange; people say, “Oh, we’d love to have you come and talk about AIDS, just don’t mention sex and condoms.” *Hello?!* And then they moan about the problem of teenage pregnancy in their communities. What do they think is going on?

Mass immaculate conceptions?

Really!

At 20, you're still so young. How has AIDS personally affected you?

In my freshman year at Northwestern, one of the theater professors died. Though I didn't know him, I saw how deeply his death affected so many people. That was the eye-opener. Later that year, a family friend tested positive and that's when I started volunteering.

When it comes to AIDS activism, who are your role models?

I've read a lot of Mary Fisher's work and I think she's terrific. And I have tremendous respect for Larry Kramer.

What are your thoughts on the so-called [anti-HIV] morning-after pill?

If it works, it could save a lot of people. Everyone is excited about this and the advances in treatment, but a lot of people don't read beyond the headlines, which can really damage prevention efforts. AIDS is still with us.

So nice to hear someone else say it. Have you ever had unsafe sex?

No. But generally I don't discuss my sexual history -- it's not relevant to the programs.

Wouldn't teens benefit from hearing what you've gone through?

To a point. But as long as I don't identify too strongly with any one group of people, it's easier for the message to remain universal. Besides, I have access to audiences where many activists are not welcome, and I want to take advantage of that.

What methods will you use in doing teen prevention?

I'm aware that just one lecture from Miss America isn't going to do much. But I want to talk to kids so they can see we're in this together. For me to support the community-based programs that are already in place is the ideal focus, as they'll still be there when I'm gone.

And when your reign is over?

I've got one year left of school, and I'll stay active as a volunteer and go back to the organization I used to work with. Just because I'm Miss America doesn't mean I can't stuff mailers in envelopes.

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