Editor’s Letter

August 1, 2000 By Walter Armstrong

Should people with HIV protect their sex partners from the virus? Of course, the only answer that matters is the one HIVers themselves give, in their actions. Some never have sex. Some have sex only with other positive people. Some always disclose or use condoms or both. Some don’t give a shit about their partners. Most, I believe (based on 13 years as a promiscuous homosexual who has remained uninfected in a city where one of every three men I meet likely has the virus), do the best they can. Whether this is good enough is becoming the real question.

The trend to make HIV transmission illegal is on the rise (see “America’s Most Unwanted”). Punitive and self-righteous, suspicious of HIVers’ sexuality and ignorant of the facts of transmission, these laws are backed by 70 percent of Americans. Their reasoning: Since, after 15 years of safe-sex messages, HIV is still being spread, it’s time to scare people who have the virus into the responsibility of disclosing before sex. The uninfected don’t get AIDS because of their actions, according to these laws. The infected give it to them.

This push to punish reached critical mass in 1997, when Nushawn Williams, this month’s cover, became its poster boy. That year, a town in upstate New York was seized by a public health panic, after a dozen or so young women tested positive and were found to have one sexual contact in common: Williams, a 19-year-old African American from New York City then doing time for dealing drugs. If Williams hadn’t materialized, the conservative lawmakers behind “HIV crime” laws would have been smart to create him—which, in a way, they, and the media, did, stitching together from the fragments of this messed-up kid’s life (and their own phobias) an “AIDS monster.” In a year when the new drugs were saving scores of once-doomed PWAs, prime-time stories about a black man with HIV preying on lily-white innocence breathed new life into the old stereotype of sex-crazed “diseased pariahs” spreading death. Even *The New York Times* was alarmed enough to editorialize about the protease revolution’s downside: Healthy (read: horny) HIVers would shed their Lazarus shrouds and flaunt their true Patient Zero selves.

That there is something monstrous about HIVers’ sexuality may be the epidemic’s most terrifying myth. And the fear and hatred are by no means limited to the uninfected. The body as damaged goods, your bodily fluids as toxic waste, your most intimate parts seeded with death—this comes with the psychic territory of having HIV. From the start, PWAs have resisted this stigma. “[We have the right] to as full and satisfying sexual and emotional lives as anyone else,” read one of the Denver Principles, the 1983 gospel of PWA self-empowerment. But the 11 gay men who drafted the document attached this right to a grave duty: “PWAs have an ethical responsibility to inform their potential sexual partners of their health status.” In the years since, AIDS activism has

defended the rights of PWAs while dropping the discussion of disclosure. So, too, has AIDS prevention: “Assume everyone you have sex with is positive and protect yourself” functioned, whatever else its aims, to normalize sex with the infected. The early PWAs were wrestling with a moral dilemma; the movement, led partly by HIV negative activists, has struck a political pose.

Only slightly less predictable than the rush to condemn Williams was the rush, by the politically correct, to rescue him. While some AIDS advocacy groups had no comment, others projected him as a “victim” of racism, poverty, anything other than his own recklessness. False stories were floated that he was retarded. The absence of any DNA testing to match his and the women’s viruses was cited to suggest that he was framed. (Williams himself denies responsibility, claiming that he never knew he had HIV when he was with them. The evidence contradicts him, but Williams is a man of many faces: His affection and remorse for his “victims,” as recorded by Lisa Kennedy in “The Miseducation of Nushawn Williams,” are real.) Such bad faith on the part of advocates, coupled with years of “rights” rhetoric and a silence about “responsibility,” has done nothing to humanize HIVers for the vast majority of Americans who want to lock them up.

Nushawn Williams isn’t Everyperson with HIV, nor is the trend to criminalize HIV a witch-hunt. Yet these laws are a chilling sign that the infected and the uninfected have a long way to go to understand each other. Once, half out of my head with panic that I’d been infected, I tracked down the stranger—by then almost a monster in my mind—with whom I’d had unsafe sex. I asked him if he was positive. “Yes,” he said, “and you are too, right?” “No,” I told him. “I’m really sorry,” he said, and then: “But tell me one thing. Why did you let me fuck you without a condom?” This was, of course, the same question I wanted to put to him. In that moment, each of us, I think, from opposite sides of the viral divide, learned something about each others’ all-too-human but mistaken assumptions. Coming out as positive before you have sex, like so much of living with HIV, is painful in ways that the HIV negative can’t even begin to imagine. It also takes courage. That’s why it’s past time for our beloved, beleaguered community to tell the truth about sex—that it’s an issue not just of rights, but of right and wrong.

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