Editor’s Letter

January 1, 2003 By Walter Armstrong

I was on www.m4m4sex.com last Saturday at 2 a.m., instant-messaging with Everbaltop. “I know about 20 guys who got infected in the past year,” he typed. “Everyone’s partying and having unsafe sex. That’s what these websites are all about.”

“I do, too,” I replied. “I only hope they’re the same 20 as yours.”

“Doubt it,” he said. “We need to go back to ’a condom every time’ like it was in the ’80s.”

Everbaltop and I argued for a while about whether it was possible, or even desirable, to go back to the ’80s. “A condom every time” is over, fear tactics are over, slogans are over, even the “crisis” is over. You can’t live in terror of HIV forever, after all.

“Is another whole generation of us gonna get wiped out?” he typed before signing off into the ether.

That’s a maddening question to ask yourself at any time of day -- never mind trying to answer it. Last October, a group of HIV positive gay men at San Francisco’s Stop AIDS Project ventured an answer: No. They did this by launching their own safe-sex campaign. It is pretty much everything that current prevention is not supposed to be: It has a slogan -- “HIV is no picnic” -- and, more important, its aim is to inspire fear of AIDS in negative gay men. The posters are deliberately ugly, even grotesque (see above). In melodramatic black and white, each shows an HIVer (all four are members of the group, Positive Force) suffering a specific AIDS affliction or med side effect, spelled out in bold no-nonsense type: Diarrhea, Facial Wasting, Crix Belly, Night Sweats. “I don’t care how good the sex is or how hot the guy is, nothing is worth what I’m going through now,” the men warn. Nothing could be closer to “The wages of sin is death” -- or, for that matter, further from the “Safe sex is hot sex” of the ’80s.

The ads ran not only in the local gay paper but, blown up big, in the same bus-shelter spaces where ads for HIV meds showing shiny, happy mountain-climbers once ran. A friend told me that the day these posters went up all across town, San Franciscans of all persuasions literally stopped in their tracks and stood gaping. It may have been the first time in a decade that AIDS registered as a dreadful reality rather than a “manageable disease.”

Going back to the ’80s is no joyride. The “HIV is no picnic” posters upset a lot of people. Some longtime survivors argued that it was demeaning to, even demonizing of, PWAs. Some newly diagnosed argued that it was demoralizing. Some treatment activists argued that it would terrify

people away from HIV meds. Others argued that it would trigger violence against people with HIV. A petition was circulated, town meetings scheduled. In short, the campaign is a success: It took a conversation that gay men were having in private at 2 a.m. and imposed it on an entire city.

But will it succeed as prevention? Will young gay men begin to think of getting HIV not as another STD to shrug off with pills but as a devastating disease to be avoided at all cost? And what of the possible collateral damage to people with HIV caused by this fear tactic? Is that the price we pay for saving lives? These are all important questions. But one thing is certain: A handful of HIV positive men who care about not spreading HIV delivered a shock to the system. Short of spiking our drinking water with Prozac -- and flooding our self-hating gay brains with feel-good chemicals whose neat side effect is to smother libido -- it’s hard to imagine a more effective action in a desperate but do-nothing time.

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