Editor’s Letter

Semper Fi

June 1, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

The U.S. Marine Corps motto, *semper fi* (short for *semper fidelis)*, means “always faithful.” I know this because I’m the daughter of a former Marine captain. My younger sister and I heard plenty of military terms in our house. Dad liked to yell, “Time, tide and formation wait for no man” up the stairs whenever we were late. My sister and I used to whisper, “Time, tide and formation may wait for no *man*, but they’re just going to have to wait for us girls.”

We took Navy showers (my father went to Annapolis). The drill: Get wet; turn off the water; soap up; turn the water back on and rinse as fast as you can, in the coldest water you can stand. It was necessary—Dad lived with two long-haired teenagers who needed to shower and primp just as he was getting ready for work. (Our hot-water heater had its limits.) While I sometimes begrudged my father’s militancy, it came to deeply inspire me.

Long after my dad hung up his “dress blues,” as his fancy uniform was called, his example of being totally dedicated to a cause has stayed with me. I thought of him when I met former Marine Sergeant Ozzy Ramos, the subject of our profile on page 24. Not long after Ramos enlisted in the Marines, he lost his wife, daughter and stepson to AIDS. This was earlier in the epidemic, when AIDS stigma, especially in the armed forces, was severe. But Ramos, who is HIV negative, went on to educate his fellow servicemen and superiors about the disease—and now, in the spirit of *semper fi,* he has pledged himself to building a public home for HIV-affected families.

His resolve has moved me, a relatively newly minted AIDS activist, especially as I look at how AIDS is disproportionately affecting the African-American community and how our country seems to be slow to respond. As our feature story on page 28 points out, there may be no better example of the gap between AIDS circa 1981 and AIDS circa 2008 than that which exists between Oakland, California, a new hotbed of HIV infection, and San Francisco, an early epicenter of the epidemic.

While whiter and better-funded San Francisco has made great progress in supporting and treating its HIV-positive population, Oakland’s largely black positive citizens often seem and feel invisible. How can HIV-positive people in San Francisco be sitting in glossy storefront windows getting acupuncture while across the Bay, people living with AIDS wander homeless on the streets of Alameda County’s Oakland? How can America have let this happen? Especially while we send billions of dollars and our bravest men and women overseas to fight to save the rest of the world?

The answer, I think, lies in the way people with HIV can still be seen: the flotsam and jetsam of society, inconveniently polluting others' clean shores. Thankfully, there are those committed to turning the tide. Like Robert Scott, MD, profiled in our feature story, who runs Oakland's only HIV-focused private practice and who is committed to treating the underserved black and Latino communities there.

Whenever I feel daunted by the task we activists face in fighting AIDS apathy, the misperception that this is a "manageable" condition, and the lack of sufficient funding and response from our national government, I think of people like Dr. Scott and Ozzy Ramos and my dad. And I remember another one of my favorite Marine sayings, from a recruitment poster—"No one likes to fight, but someone needs to know how"—and I resolve anew to remain always faithful to the needs of people living with HIV.

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