Everybody's Business

June 1, 2000 By Jay Blotcher

Wall Street and people with HIV often make better enemies than friends. So it's ironic, to say the least, that the Bible of American Capitalism, *The Wall Street Journal*, has featured some of the best AIDS reporting of the protease era, winning not only the respect of industry and activists alike but a 1997 Pulitzer Prize in the bargain. What caused the once-soft-on-AIDS *Journal's* attitude adjustment? By all accounts, Michael Waldholz.

"Waldholz's reporting has been cutting edge and top notch," says Mike Barr, former editor of *TAGline*, the Treatment Action Group's newsletter. "No one could ever have predicted such AIDS coverage from that corner. Why else would we utopian socialists be seen toting *WSJ* under our arms in the East Village?"

The divorced-with-children reporter who was noted for his no-nonsense cancer coverage allows that selling that hook to the top brass was a challenge. "AIDS was looked at as an anomalous condition that wouldn't affect our—quote, unquote—readers," he recalls. But Waldholz had the experience—and an enviable Rolodex—to make his case. The Newark, New Jersey native had earned his chops as a science journalist the old- school way, covering health care for New York City weeklies before advancing to *Business Week* and, in 1980, the *Journal*. Short of wearing a porkpie hat with a press card in it, Waldholz displays an occasional pugnacity effective when interviewing tight-lipped drug company execs. But just as quickly, he shows an avuncular mien, reminiscent of his early days as a high school English teacher, before he entered the fray of journalism. Still, with R&D of AIDS medicines only starting to heat up in the late '80s, it took until 1995, when protease first hit, for Waldholz to be given license to follow the story full time.

Waldholz may have come late to the AIDS press pool, but he made quite a splash. Investigating industry's optimistic findings from protease research, the skeptical Waldholz snooped around for the resistance data left off the press releases. But getting early access to the pioneering studies of David Ho, MD, and Marty Markowitz, MD, at New York City's Aaron Diamond Institute convinced Waldholz that the drugs were the real thing. So it was the Journal's new kid on the block who broke the story, beating out such veterans as Newsday's Laurie Garrett and The New York Times' Lawrence Altman, MD. As TAG's Mark Harrington recalls, "Altman was busy covering Jeff Getty's baboon bone-marrow transplant and missed the revolution. Waldholz got the AIDS treatment story of the decade."

If fans point to it as his biggest scoop, critics remember it differently, calling Waldholz irresponsible for dropping the word cure into his report. Still smarting, Waldholz says, "People

would collar me in the hallway—even colleagues—and ask, 'Jesus, don't you think the reporting is premature?'" But he's quick to point out that his coverage included serious reservations, detailing how hard this new AIDS drug therapy was going to be to take and afford.

By then, HIV had famously come to the *Journal's* newsroom: Page One Editor David Sanford, then close to death, traced his journey from probable AIDS statistic to HAART poster boy in a breakthrough first-person article. Along with Waldholz's protease inhibitor coverage, this became part of the *Journal's* AIDS series that grabbed the 1997 Pulitzer Prize. Sanford's astonishing Lazarus experience, Waldholz says, "served to reinforce my reporting and persuade my editors that I was actually on to something."

Yet, while acknowledging that the drugs present many complications and no cure, Waldholz still sees the big picture. "A lifetime on the medicines seems to be quite a hardship, and resistance does seem to arise in some," he says. "But even that is better than the alternative. I mean, AIDS was a death sentence until these drugs. The drug makers understand they need to make less-toxic medicines, and some are trying to do so."

Which begs the question, Has reporting on the business of AIDS made Waldholz cynical about the industry? Waldholz's answer shows that his faith in capitalism is as solid as his faith in science: "The fact that pharmaceutical companies see a profit in fighting the disease can only be helpful in the long run. Neither the companies nor the folks inside them come in just one flavor—their motives and goals are very complicated." No apologist, Waldholz is known to knock a drug company when profits outpace compassion. As evidence, he points to his criticisms of Glaxo Wellcome for its delay of drug trials for 1592, charges that echoed activist suspicions that the hold-up was designed to outwait the patent-expiration date of in-house competitor AZT. And last year, when Bristol-Myers Squibb (BMS) announced an investment of $100 million into a drug program in Africa, Waldholz penned a corrosive article pointing out that BMS was testing only its own drugs and if effective, the act of goodwill promised the company a lucrative new market. "They didn't like it," Waldholz says with a laugh.

Yet because the industry is so sensitive to its public image, it makes unprecedented moves to be seen not only as profit maker but as educator and benefactor. "If they don't," Waldholz says, "They'll be pilloried." Waldholz covered the industry's most recent self-inflicted wound to its reputation—its push to prevent lower-priced drug manufacture in Africa, a cause taken up by a vote-hungry Al Gore after activist demos made the six o'clock news. Waldholz predicts that pharmaceuticals will eventually offer the drugs at cost in Africa or give away their patents. "Once they establish good faith with those discounts," he says, "the high prices charged here will be more acceptable."

Among activists who routinely offer harsh criticisms of journalists, Michael Waldholz commands a surprising amount of kudos. Even the chronically displeased Larry Kramer tells *POZ*, "Waldholz, in my dealings with him, has been very professional, very knowledgeable, very caring. He's accessible."

Accessible, let alone caring, is not the first word that comes to mind about the current state of mainstream AIDS reporting. In the past few years, leading newspapers have pulled reporters from the viral beat. Taking a stance contrary to many in the AIDS community, Waldholz says this change was warranted, due to a drug-pipeline dry spell and the fact that protease inhibitors have made the disease more of a chronic, manageable condition. But recent events offer a flood of story possibilities to fill the notebooks of responsible reporters, he insists. The imminent release of a new class of drugs that keep the virus from entering cells promises to be big news, as will kinder, gentler protease inhibitors.

So where's the next Pulitzer? According to Waldholz, the stories that will vie with Alan Greenspan's latest interest- rate pronouncements for the Journal's front page will range from the devastation in developing countries to the toll on African-American and Latino gay men here at home. "Those of us who are good journalists have to figure out ways of reporting this," Waldholz says of this newest "not our readers" hurdle.

But one bit of news that Waldholz has "no patience for" is the recent embrace of the AIDS dissidents by South Africa President Thabo Mbeki. "If it's true that HIV is not the cause of AIDS," he says flatly, "what can I say but I missed the story." Anything else? After a moment he adds that HIV-is-harmless guru Peter Duesberg, MD, should test his theory by infecting himself with the virus.

Waldholz says he hopes that the U.S. media doesn't miss the real story at the 13th International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa, which he will cover in July. "Some 14,000 Americans die of AIDS each year," Waldholz says, "and that pales compared to the millions who are dying each year abroad. It seems to me that the focus—for activists as well as journalists—ought to be where the problem is greatest."

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