Flying Ace

Francine Rodriguez reaches for the sky

November 1, 1998 By Kevin O'Leary

The women of Bedford Hills maximum-security prison in New York state get to wear one article of clothing that is their own. When I meet Francine Rodriguez, 29, in the office of the prison's ACE (AIDS Counseling and Education) program, she is wearing a silk shirt with her state-issued olive-drab pants. A ringlet of her perfectly coiffed hair falls over her right eye.

It's Mrs. Rodriguez to you. She married the love of her life—and codefendant—Anthony Rodriguez, in 1994, seven years after testing positive. The pair was charged with assault after beating a man she says attacked her first. The incident occurred in the same Brooklyn park where she had first met Anthony three months before. Home for him is now 45 minutes away, where he's serving a longer sentence in Otisville. "At least we know where each other is," she says.

A serodiverse relationship can be tough enough, but imagine when the walls between you have barbed wire. "We write all the time, and we get to call each other once every six months," she says, "on our anniversary in June and for the December holidays." They get 20 minutes on the phone.

She points to two large boxes on the mail cart. "That's pamphlets and stuff for him," she says. "He's doing AIDS education now, too." Rodriguez says that Anthony was the first person (not excluding her family) not to reject her upon finding out she had HIV. But Anthony just seemed like a special case, the one person who could love her, virus and all. It was only after she went to prison and joined the ACE program, that she found others who would not reject her. Then she bloomed.

At first, I was afraid to come to the ACE office," she recalls. "I was still in denial. But I thought I had every symptom I'd ever heard of." Rodriguez confided in fellow inmate Kathy Boudin, whose trailblazing AIDS activism behind the walls had become legendary. Boudin urged her to get involved in ACE.

You get the sense that when Rodriguez commits to something, she holds on for dear life. She joined ACE this past February as an HIV wallflower, silent and shy. But soon she put out feelers and, after a few months, had launched a prison newsletter on AIDS and women's health. ACE News is now a sophisticated, sisterly forum for women behind bars to discuss AIDS treatment, resources

and stigma. Rodriguez's editorials have put her in the limelight: She is often stopped in the hall for advice or encouragement.

"I also work in the mess hall part-time as an assistant cook," she says. Asked if having their dinner made by one of the most out HIV positive women at Bedford Hills has caused any problems with inmates, Rodriguez raises her chin and says: "Just once. It was count time in the mess hall. I was sitting with Karen Ely, whom I call Mom. This loudmouth across the room points at me and says something about an 'AIDS-infected bitch.'" That, Rodriguez decided, would not do.

"I gave my glasses to Mom and said, 'I have to hit this girl.' I had to. So I marched over there and hit her. Then I said, 'I don't have AIDS. I have HIV.'" The other inmates, recognizing an underdog, readily cheered her on; afterward even the guards supported her.

Once Rodriguez came out about her serostatus, getting adequate antiretroviral treatments wasn't a problem, but the side effects were. "I was on Viracept for six months," she says. "I was right out of The Exorcist, a mess. Then I noticed wasting in my legs, and I was getting the stomach thing, too. I got off it. Now I'm on a hydroxyurea combination. No side effects."

Like many women in the ACE program, Rodriguez worries about life after prison. She has found not only a self but a community behind bars, so she naturally fears the future: "I think about going home, and it scares me. I'm up for parole in 2000 but it probably won't happen. Too soon."

One thing she does look forward to on the outside is skydiving. At night in her cell, she thinks about jumping out of an airplane and flying. "It's total freedom," she says. "I can't wait."

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