Get Our Phil

The king of chat loves to do just that

November 1, 1998 By Dominic Hamilton-Little

Long before Oprah, Rosie and, yes, Magic, one man brought real-life conflict and compassion into living rooms nationwide. During Phil Donahue's near-30-year reign, the talk-show pioneer introduced America to a host of progressive causes, well before radical was chic. Not one to sit still, Donahue has since traded in his microphone for a megaphone. He recently sat down to discuss how he wound up on the board of Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), what made Ryan White so lovable and why Hollywood hotshots should get up off their butts.

***POZ*: If you were doing a show today about AIDS, what would it be called?**

Phil Donahue: *It Ain't Over*. And I'd get Yogi Berra to say it. We're in a strange time, and we shouldn't be surprised by the conflicting energies. We no longer have Rock Hudson, ravaged with illness, arriving at the Los Angeles airport following unorthodox treatments in Paris. We no longer have Ryan White's funeral with Elton John singing. Or the deaths of famous people like Halston or Liberace. Now it's about the astonishingly healthy and beautiful countenance of Magic Johnson with his own TV show.

Do you think he should have used the show to raise AIDS awareness or funds?

Sure, if he wanted to. But he should also live his life and pursue his dreams. We should all rejoice at his health.

Where do you think we're at with AIDS today?

We're at a bend in the road. The cocktails work for some, but the side effects can be atrocious. And with people living longer, AIDS agencies are being taxed in different ways than before. We've always had a difficult time raising money. Now we've got donor fatigue, and it's become even more complex as we're cursed by the success of the research community.

What we need now is new energy, lots more straight folk coming out in support. Why doesn't Colin Powell or Sam Nunn get it? Barry Goldwater got it. Everyone needs to just get over it! We need all those famous Hollywood faces who lunch with gay people every day to be vocal. I want my kids to see their heroes—Schwarzenegger and Cruise—march down Fifth Avenue in the Gay Pride parade.

You have a long history as an advocate for gays and PWAs. What brought you into the world of AIDS?

It was a gradual, evolutionary awareness. I came of age in the ’50s, and the guys I went to school with wanted to beat up queers. Now, I didn’t want to do that, but I certainly didn’t want to be around a queer.

The Phil Donahue Show had its first openly gay guy on in 1968, and the whole city of Dayton came to a halt. We were accused of legitimizing homosexuality. Our motives weren’t all that noble since we were being paid to draw a crowd, and sexual issues were the most riveting. So we did it again and again, and enough so that even this grade-B homophobe—in that I was never directly aggressive—found his views changing.

Here we were in the ’60s, marching and singing “We Shall Overcome,” feeling liberal and proud, and this gay world was opening up to me. I began to question what it must mean to live a life in the closet. To live life as a lie. To have to endure the humiliation of the YMCA arrests and things of that nature. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church was saying, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” The Church was legitimizing homophobia while it is one of the world’s largest institutional closets. So I began to see that gayness is not a moral issue, and that we all had to do something about homophobia.

Then the plague hit, and we did our first show about AIDS in 1982. We had Larry Kramer on. Later, a fellow who had worked for me, Michael, told me that he was positive. I became a sort of amateur analyst as he confided in me. Here was someone who had so little—he was HIV positive, an illegal immigrant, had no money, no job—and I asked him how he got by, and he told me about GMHC. Then there was the time Jeanne White called me crying—and I’d never heard her cry before—wondering what she was going to do without her son. And on our shows, I saw engineers who wouldn’t put a mike on a PWA. Suddenly I had a front-row seat, and I got pissed off.

What was it about Ryan White that affected you so much?

Watching his mother watch him die. And he was cute as hell. He was such a dude, with his turned-up collar and sunglasses. I admired him because he wasn’t homophobic. This adolescent would be in a hospital waiting room next to a guy with Kaposi’s sarcoma, and he’d say, “Mom, I’m the only one here who knows what that is.” Their relationship was amazing. She always gave him the last word—she didn’t mother-duck him, but was always right behind him to help.

It’s no wonder he was so remarkable. I just have to ask, what’s it like being married to “That Girl” Marlo Thomas?
(Laughs) Like being married to this tornado of energy.

Well, you’ve obviously met your match.

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