HIV VIPs

Marisa Cardinale and Ellen LaPointe make it work

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Marisa Cardinale and Ellen LaPointe are out to prove that scientists and activists can battle AIDS and still find love along the way.

Cardinale and LaPointe met nearly three years ago, shortly before LaPointe was offered a job at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital's HIV research department called HIVCare in San Francisco. Cardinale was in the midst of starting up Community Research Institute on AIDS (CRIA), a community-based research organization in New York City that succeeded the now defunct Community Research Initiative. So, the duo decided to become AIDS crusaders during the week and bi-coastal lovers on the weekend.

Although their daily routines differ -- LaPointe is a researcher, Cardinale is an activist -- they are both working toward a common goal. LaPointe and Cardinale work for community-based research organizations, which seek out, study and promote experimental drugs that show signs of increasing the quality of life for people living with AIDS. They study drugs that "are ignored by the large institutions," says the 35-year-old Cardinale. "We are here to take care of people with AIDS right now. We're looking at what can help them today."

"We share this common thing of being involved in the fight against AIDS," says the 27-year-old LaPointe. "It's not whether our organizations collaborate. That's not something that's important. Having HIV invites collaboration with lots of people. What's important is that we share the same frame of reference during our work day, even though it'snot in the same environment. It brings us closer."

LaPointe and Cardinale come to their current jobs from different perspectives. LaPointe's is more clinical, Cardinale's is more personal. LaPointe became strongly involved with AIDS in 1990 as coordinator of Brown University's AIDS Program.

Cardinale is part of the first generation of AIDS activists. The generation of people who began losing friends to a strange disease more than a decade ago. In the mid 1980s, while managing an art gallery in New York City's Greenwich Villagem she watched friends succumb to AIDS. "Most of my friends in the early years of my adulthood are dead," she says. "The whole core group of people. A lot of them in their late 20s and early 30s are now gone. That's really depressing."

Cardinale founded CRIA in 1990, after a three year stint with the American Foundatuion for AIDS Research (AmFAR). So far, the organization has been successful. CRIA's most significant accomplishment has been helping to get federal approval for Rifabutin, a drug that treats opportunistic infections, and Marinol, a marijuana derivative that significantly increases the appetities of people living with AIDS.

After hours the two pursue activism in their own way. LaPointe is starting the EVE Fund, an organization to promote safer sex practices for lesbians. "There is so little information. There is no data, no numbers to throw out [to lesbians about their risk of getting AIDS]," LaPointe says. "Not all lesbians are urban, educated, white, living in fabulous happening cities. Lots of lesbians live in cities where they don't get this information. So little is known."

Conversely, Cardinale is trying to light a fire for the sake of activism. She fears people have lost their sense of anger.

"There is a terrible thing happening. When [Bill] Clinton was elected as President, we had an opportunity to replace the people at the National Institute of Health. But some are saying, 'No, keep the same people that haven't done anything for 12 years.' We are being lulled into not being angry anymore. That's the biggest problem," Cardinale says.

Cardinale also fears that today's youths are growing desensitized to the issue. "I know several women who are between 12 and 20 years old. They come up to me and say they are thinking of going into a career in AIDS. That's horrifying to hear. For them (they were maybe 7 years old when AIDS was identified) AIDS is just a part of their gay identity," she says. "On the other hand, AIDS has led to social change because the stakes are so high. I also see AIDS being looked at by the new generation in a disconnected way -- as an institution, something that's part of the landscape. It's not something that they think of as an outrage or an abomination because AIDS has been around since they were kids."

Do these two passionate women expect their respective AIDS organizations to find the cure? Hardly.

"My gut feeling is that there isn't going to be a single bullet," Cardinale says. "It will be a combination of more and more drugs that become available and that, in combination, will keep increasing the lives of people with AIDS. It will be a combination of very tiny steps. I don't think it will be the type of thing where you pop a pill and it's over."

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