Hatch a Plan

On the run—this time for Congress

November 1, 1998 By Terry Bisson

Lumberton, North Carolina, is a not-so-sleepy Southern town that straddles I-95 like a cowpoke on a rail fence. The seat of Robeson County, within spitting distance of Fort Bragg and situated on the East's busiest north-south hard-drug and handgun artery, Lumberton is the postmodern South at its most conflicted: prideful, peaceful and provincial at heart, and more than a little violent around the edges.

This is Eddie Hatcher's home.

A Native American (Tuscaroran), openly gay, politically radical and much-liked (and, by some, much-hated) community organizer, Hatcher has long been a Robeson County landmark. He raised his profile 10 years ago, in February 1988, when, half-crazed by what he calls the corruption and racism of local law enforcement, he and a fellow activist staged an armed takeover of the local newspaper, *The Robesonian*.

Their intentions were peaceful, and no hostages were hurt. Their demands of the paper's editors: Investigate drug-dealing cops and some 26 unsolved murders of Native Americans and African Americans.

The publicity generated by the trial achieved some of these aims. Hatcher was one of the first people tried under the 1984 Anti-Terrorist Act (as a Native American he qualified as a "foreigner"). Prepped by activist lawyers William Kunstler and Ronald Kuby, he represented himself and was acquitted—no small accomplishment for a nonwhite gay rad in a Southern courtroom.

But Hatcher isn't the sort to leave well enough alone. When he persisted in stirring up trouble, initiating a petition drive to remove the local sheriff, officials responded by reindicting him for the takeover, this time on state charges. Hatcher jumped bail, skipping like a flat stone from reservation to reservation across the country, until he landed at the Soviet consulate in San Francisco. His asylum request was denied.

Captured, extradited and convicted of kidnapping, Hatcher drew 20 years' hard time. In North Carolina, that can be hard time indeed, but Hatcher is a survivor, and he continued the struggle for human rights behind the walls, publishing two newsletters and winning a landmark lawsuit for

Native American religious rights.

It wasn't until he almost died in 1995 that Hatcher learned he was HIV positive.

At first, the prison doctor said his raging fever and shortness of breath were all in Hatcher's head—psychosomatic at best, malingering at worst—and sent him back to his cellblock. Eddie's mother, Thelma Clark, made a few frantic calls and eventually got through to the governor ("at 8 pm on a Saturday night!" Hatcher recalls). By this time, his CD4 cell count was down to four, and his temperature up to 106. "I was in such pain, I prayed to die," he says grimly.

Hatcher was finally properly diagnosed with PCP and put on a 21-day antibiotic IV. That was the good news. The bad news, the second doc announced, was that he had AIDS. "He said, 'There's nothing we can do. You're going to die.'"

Hatcher, who rarely does what he is told, quit praying to die. Nursed back to relative health, he left prison on compassionate release a few months later. "They didn't want me croaking on their watch" is how Hatcher puts it. He was out on the street with no money and no insurance. "I had no idea what to do," he says.

Then a phone call saved his life. It was from a social worker at Duke University's Infectious Disease Center, offering cocktails and sympathy. In prison, he had refused AZT, but now he signed on to d4T, 3TC and ritonavir. "I don't have any bad side effects," he says. "A little nausea, but I learned how to take care of that years ago in a beer tavern: Drink the juice from a jar of dill pickles."

That was three years ago, and today Hatcher's as much a troublemaker as ever. Another takeover? "Worse than that," he tells me, and his eyes have that familiar wicked gleam. "I'm running for the state legislature," he says.

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