Have A Ball

Sandra keeps a severe house

August 1, 1998 By Rossi

Seated at a booth in her favorite Greenwich Village diner, piling deep-fried chicken fingers atop her tossed salad, Sandra Franklin seems more like a teen than a 51-year-old women's-health educator who has made championing safer sex for lesbians and bisexual women her mission. "There's this myth that lesbians don't get infected, but I'm going into my fifteenth year with this dreadful disease and I'm here to say, 'Yes, lesbians can get AIDS.'"

Franklin, known to friends as Sandy, is father and founder of the House of Moshood. (One of only two lesbian houses in New York City, Moshood celebrated its first birthday in May.) The concept of a "house"—for those not in the know-—was created by gay street kids as a way to emulate family life. Although house members don't always cohabit, they form intense bonds and tend to view their chosen family as a major improvement over the one that they were born into.

Houses are often named after perfumes or fashion designers—Moshood is the Brooklyn-based Afrocentric designer—and are run by a father and mother who tend not to be a traditional gender. Although they've been around for decades, houses first received widespread attention in the 1991 documentary film Paris Is Burning.

By day, Franklin counsels women who have found their way to detox centers or prisons, preaching the virtues of the "no drugs, no HIV" mantra as someone who's been there. "I'm a recovering addict, a person with AIDS and an ex-offender," she says. "I don't just talk the talk. I walk it. "

By night she prowls the clubs and the streets passing out safe-sex kits to women. Also, she and the family Moshood produce fashion shows and mentor young lesbians. Last May, Moshood held its first annual ball, dedicated to the house's mother, Annette Rodriguez. The standing-room-only event drew a crowd of 700 and featured such categories as "Best-Dressed Butch or Fem."

Franklin, who claims to have spent her life living as a man—right down to the mustache—has no tolerance for the drag-king trend. "A drag king can be a feminine woman dressed up like a male. I'm an aggressive woman butch transgender male," she explains, scarfing a chicken finger. "And as the father of a house, I have to look severe at the ball!"

When Franklin was first diagnosed with HIV in 1985, her doctor told her she had two years to live.

Today, though, her viral load is undetectable and her CD4 count stands at 636. For the past year, she has been taking Combivir washed down with alternative remedies such as blue-green algae.

Though Franklin has considered retiring by the year 2000, she’s hardly the relaxing type. She is already planning on making that house a shelter for homeless PWAs. Slowing down may well be the only thing Sandra Franklin doesn’t do severe!

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