Hey, Listen!

GMHC's Amber Hollibaugh tells lesbians the truth

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Amber Hollibaugh, the head of Gay Men's Health Crisis' (GMHC) Lesbian AIDS Project (LAP), is here to tell you how badly you have been misled about lesbian transmission of HIV. She estimates that there are some 8,000 lesbians nationwide who are infected with HIV. "That's no small number," she says.

Hollibaugh has a deep, dark tan courtesy of a recent Puerto Rican vacation and bottle blond hair. We talk in the coffee bar in one of those enormous Manhattan Barnes & Noble superstores. She's garrulous, often employing three adjectives in a row to stress her point.

LAP, she says, is the only full-time group studying lesbians and AIDS. "Part of what is so painful about looking at lesbian HIV issues is that if the only thing in this epidemic that makes something believable is numbers, then by the time the numbers begin to reflect the realm of risk, it will be too late. It's probably one of the few communities that could still actively construct prevention."

Hollibaugh talks using examples. "Suppose you and I, two women, started going together, and you're HIV positive and I'm negative," she says as I feel the other coffee drinkers staring directly at us. She doesn't notice, she's on a mission to make me understand. "We call the AIDS hotline. They say, 'There's no sex problem, just don't share works, don't share blood.' We go together for three years, and in that period of time I sleep with a guy once. We break up, and I turn out to be HIV positive. If I go to the CDC reporting or surveillance mechanism, the route of transmission is going to be considered heterosexual sex regardless of me knowing I have an HIV positive partner. You sit there and realize people are just committed to a certain ideology. It doesn't matter what the facts are."

Early on people laughed at the idea of AIDS among the nation's lesbians. "In the two years the project has been around, we've managed to change that attitude. Now there's more credibility." Why have lesbians been left to fend for themselves? Hollibaugh explains. "It's kind of a bitter refusal to see the evidence that women who sleep with women are increasingly getting HIV. No one has spoken to them."

One word at a time, Hollibaugh is trying to change that.

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