LA Women

January 1, 2000 By Esther Kaplan and Ronnilyn Pustil

Winding our way through the soulless glass and steel of the sprawling Los Angeles Convention Center, we find it hard to imagine that somewhere in its bowels there are people at all—until we hear a roar.

After bungled registration and poor directions, we have finally found the opening plenary of the National Conference on Women and HIV/AIDS. As we enter the jammed room, LA congressmember Maxine Waters is working the 2,000-strong crowd: “Women, you have to believe in yourself, that you deserve happiness, you deserve decent health care. Nobody has the power until they decide to take the power!” As she challenges the audience to honesty (“We know that many of the people we love come to us from another man’s bed, but we just don’t want to recognize it”) and to action (“We need to be at the floor at half-time at the basketball game!”), the conference seems to hold the promise of real resistance.

Yet as the days tick by, that moment becomes only a fond memory. When scheduled speaker and CDC honcho Helene Gayle is a no-show and NIH and NAIAD top guns fail to stop by, no one kicks up much of a fuss. Drug-company booths reign free from dissent, sending armies with bright-yellow Combivir knapsacks and canvas Viracept totes into the streets of LA. And the policy sessions—a chance for women to get down to brass tacks about such issues as housing or prison health care—are often scheduled to compete with clinical workshops on lipodystrophy and other hot topics.

The conference’s true excitement is generated not by the presenters or press, but by the hundreds of women with HIV. It seems that, among sisters, nothing is too taboo for discussion. Women share safe-sex tips, huddle in the hallway to strategize over a new activist campaign for microbicides and line up at the Women Alive booth to meet writer River Huston and her Yorkshire terrier, Buddy. “These are my girls,” Huston tells us between autographing free copies of her book, *A Positive Life.*

Also wandering through the exhibit hall—was it as the loudspeaker announced “At 1:30 there’s a roundtable on HIV in the genital tract”?—are *POZ* cover girls Monica Johnson (more toned and much cuter than on the April 1998 cover—“It’s the Tae-Bo. I sit on my couch and watch the tapes”) and December 1998’s Jane Fowler, looking smashing in head-to-toe purple. Canadian PWAs Louise Binder and Janet Conners, cochairs of the upcoming first national conference on women and AIDS in that country, are scoping the event for dos and don’ts. And there’s Judy Greenspan of Berkeley’s HIV in Prison Committee, with suitcase in tow, and Sherri Kaplan of Miami’s Center for Positive

Connections, handing out her newsletter. Meanwhile, the all-female staff of *HIV Plus*, the tattooed, leather-clad and treatment-savvy Spice Girls of AIDS, stake out symposia like agents trained by Pamela Anderson.

We want to elope with the Spice Girls, but we're marooned at the *POZ* booth, where it isn't only the poz vets who are out in full force; many newly diagnosed women have traveled great distances to the conference.

One beautiful woman, thirtysomething with honey-colored hair, approaches. "We get *POZ* at the health department where I work," she says, smiling. But when we offer her a subscription of her own, it all pours out. "Does it come wrapped up?" she asks. "I live in a small town, and no one but the people I work with knows I'm positive." She lowers her head and begins to cry. "I have three young children and I don't know if I should tell them," she says. "I don't want their lives to be harder because people know their mom has HIV." She cries harder. "I'm sorry. I only tested positive six weeks ago. This is all so overwhelming." As she wipes the tears from her cheeks, an African-American woman joins in. "You've got to tell your children," she says. "Be open with them. I told my daughter right away." The pep talk has begun, and soon the blond woman regains her composure. "I'm lucky to be at this conference," she says. "I guess it was good timing."

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