Last Laughs

Death be not proud and disease be not pretty, but The Diseased Pariah News giggles all the way to the graveyard

October 1, 1997 By Greg Lugliani

Caution! Scientific evidence has proven that *The Diseased Pariah News* (*DPN*) promotes boners among shirtless young men who work at book-binderies on hot summer days. By purchasing this copy of *DPN*, you are not only condoning but encouraging this behavior (and whatever else they do to relieve themselves after the shift is over). *DPN* is intended for the entertainment, education and enlightenment of individuals of hearty mind and robust will who are at least 18 and who promise to have sex in any position but the missionary, and always on a Sunday. By breaking this seal, you have agreed to these terms. Not sanitized for your protection."

So reads the white paper strip -- like those found sealing toilet seats in clean rooms at your better hotels -- wrapped around an issue of *DPN*, a 'zine by, for and about people with HIV first sprung upon an unsuspecting public in 1990. But readers beware: The wrapper is less a stamp of cleanliness than a postmodern fig leaf, barely concealing the lively loins that are *DPN*'s 40-plus pages -- all hopelessly infected with a strain of reckless irreverence virtually extinct in our politically correct times.

Reared during activism's heady heyday -- when friends and foes were larger-than-life and the death toll relentless -- *DPN* took the PWA self-empowerment philosophy to side-splitting, sometimes libelous, extremes. Today, with prognoses of people with HIV rosier than before, lackluster enemies apparently on the lam, and ACT UP membership at a low, *DPN*'s own mission may be increasingly dubious, a victim of its own success. Seven years after its editorial talons were first sharpened in San Francisco and sunk deep into its prey, even ardent 'zinophiles wonder whether this ruthless raptor is merely on a prolonged molt or finally on the endangered-species list.

"What's so damn funny about a pandemic devastating the world?" *DPN*'s late cofounder Tom Shearer mused in the publication's opening salvo, "Welcome to Our Brave New World." "Well, we have it and sometimes we find it amusing. Besides, who wants to be serious all the time, even about fatal illness? So what we're hoping to do here is bring some much-needed levity to the experience of HIV infection." And in the process of serving up punchline after sardonic punchline, over its 10-issue span *DPN* has provided a surprising amount of practical advice on how to get by in a world where too many are quick to clutch crystals, Kleenex and care bears.

The Diseased Pariah News is the brainspawn of Shearer and Beowulf Thorne, a 32-year-old graphic artist and amateur cactus-and-orchid grower from Palo Alto, California. “The magazine’s name,” the surviving confounder says, "was a reference to a single-panel cartoon in *The Advocate* about Delta Airlines refusing to fly known HIV positive people. A man at the ticket counter is asked by the agent, ’Would you like smoking, nonsmoking or the diseased-pariah section?’" From that darkly funny depiction of an episode of egregious injustice, *DPN* took not only its name but its raison d’être: No more, at least in this lusty lampoon, would those with HIV be portrayed as reviled, frail, humorless eunuchs. Nor would glamorizing AIDS be stomached. “We should warn you that our editorial policy does not include the concept that AIDS is a Wonderful Learning Opportunity and Spiritual Gift From Above. Or a Punishment for our Previous Badness,” Shearer’s editorial continues. “Nor are we much interested in being icons of noble tragedy, brave and true, stiff upper lips gleaming under our oxygen hoses. We are not saints or devils, just a couple-o-guys who ran into a Danger Penis.”

What Shearer and Thorne created was the world’s first lifestyle magazine for people with the lifestyle disease. It was an eye-opener. “My lover and I were so sick of weepy, pious stuff around HIV,” says Kevin Bentley, a San Francisco editor, longtime *DPN* fan and occasional contributor. “With an atmosphere free of all that, they were cutting-edge. And refreshingly vicious.” The cover featured an ACT UP -- style sendup of Palmolive’s Madge-the-Manicurist ’60s TV commercial: A closeup of two hands, a fingerbowl and the caption “The blood of over 100,000 Americans who have died of AIDS, Mr. President? You’re soaking in it!” Tossed together inside were serious pieces like “The PWA Primer,” “AIDS Testing Problems in Federal Prisons” and “Condom Corner,” along with “Get Fat, Don’t Die” recipes, the initial installment (“The Valley of the Ultratwinkies”) of a horny comic-strip-with-a-conscience and the first caustic video review by a curmudgeonly couch tuber called “Porn Potato.” Not to mention the highly amusing short fiction, “I Fisted Jesse Helms,” by I.M. Lying, a male escort’s evening with the senator, known in Washington trade circles as “Messy Jesse”: “Jesse began to twang the ’ol wire, and I do mean wire, and sing ”Rock of Ages“ in a loud, rather tuneful falsetto. Suddenly he let out a loud fart, simultaneously ejecting my hands and spraying me with at least a gallon of watery shit.”

DPN’s giddy brand of disrespect fast found its niche. “There was a lot of ’Can you believe they wrote this?’ -- especially about the first issue,” recalls Richard LaBonte, general manager of the country’s three A Different Light bookstores, the first to carry *DPN*. “People relished it.” But oddly it was *Newsweek* that put *DPN* on the public’s radar screen. “Some force of cosmic perversion got us a half-page article,” Thorne says. That perversion also succeeded in outing Thorne at the engineering firm that employed him as a technical illustrator. "Someone ran into the room where I was working with a respirator, hood and goggles over some toxic chemicals, waving the article around, saying ’Look, everybody! Wulf’s in *Newsweek*.’" Coworkers had shared that single respirator; a week after Thorne was proclaimed a pariah, two more magically appeared.

While it may be true that death be not proud, *DPN* sees absolutely no reason why it shouldn’t amuse, so it was only natural that Tom Shearer’s death would become grist for the ’zine’s mill. “Darn! One of our editors is dead,” Thorne editorialized in issue No. 3. “The call came late morning April 8... . Tommy was on his last legs. Well, it wasn’t unexpected, but now? I had spent a few

hours with him the night before, where we shared the bonding experience of cleaning yogurt from his oxygen hose. I paused for some cold pizza, and then hopped the bus to the Kaiser hospital." Something of a relief to friends, Shearer's death left Thorne legatee of both magazine and mortal remains. "The Tom Shearer we knew and loved died two months before the body," he says. "I got half the ashes, from which I made lovely paperweights and memorial snow domes. But the Neptune Society must be skimping on fuel because the bones aren't very well burned." Fans are promised the snow domes for sale in issue No. 11.

Since then, Thorne has been the autocratic guiding light -- or, as is emblazoned on the masthead, "Your Cranky Editor & Irresistible Force" -- imbuing the publication with his own withering, supremely scientific brilliance. The eponymous editor tested positive 10 years ago, at 22. An AIDS diagnosis came four years later. "I'm amazed at how long you can live with very few T-cells." Thorne says. "Why have I survived? I suspect it's because as a child I was sickly. I learned how to be sick. I don't take it as an insult." These days, Thorne's health leaves something to be desired. "Neuropathy has been swallowing my extremities and the left side of my face," he says. "Last year, I had this killer candida. It chewed holes in my gums so I had exposed bones. I had one T-cell at the time. Then I started taking protease inhibitors and things improved."

As to the inheritance of putting out *DPN*, Thorne turned for help to Tom Ace, a contributor who posed shirtless for "*DPN* Profile" in issue No. 3. Tapped, Ace became "Your Humpy Editor & International Liaison." Thorne's reason for the title is simple. "He's quite buxom. I've always had a letch on him."

I've got the Danger Penis. But then you probably already knew that. Relatively stable 25-year-old design student seeks other adventurous good-looking men for mutual sodomy and oral copulation. I'm 6'1", 160 pounds, with blond hair, green eyes, a wry smile, and a big...er, condom collection. So, if you're well groomed, between 20 and 40, 5'8" to 6'4", firm and lean to tight and muscular, can laugh a little at yourself and don't expect marriage the first time you make love to someone, take a chance."

When Ace, then a 31-year-old San Francisco software engineer, answered this ad in the "Meat Market" section of *DPN*'s first issue, he may have suspected he was writing to editor Beowulf Thorne. But he could not have foreseen the marriage of minds and wits that, despite the ad's caution, they were to consummate over the next seven years. Like Thorne, Ace has known his pariah status for 10 years; unlike him, he has remained rock-climbing healthy. A Renaissance man in his own right, soon after meeting Thorne he was writing for *DPN*. His first contribution, a randy exchange between a positive and negative man, appeared in the second issue -- at a time when confessing a distaste for condoms, let alone a desire for unsafe sex, was still forbidden. "I use rubbers, yeah, but it's still not as fun as buttfucking the way God intended it," says the positive character to his younger buddy. "I miss the taste of cum, too. A guy at a free clinic once told me that maybe science could invent some substitute. Even if they did, I'd still miss the experience." "I've never tasted anyone's cum," is his friend's rejoinder. "Not even your own?" "OK, I've tasted my own. But I didn't think it was anything special." "Everyone's tastes different, you know."

Not everyone will find *DPN*'s taboo trouncing and homily hosing to their taste. Thorne and Ace are merciless marksmen once they sight their target, and their aim is lethally directed at feel-good psychobabble and pseudoscientific explanations for AIDS. "We're remarkably unspiritual," Thorne says. "We tend not to tolerate any New Age crap or conspiracy theories. We don't see the need. After all, there's plenty to inspire respect and awe without resorting to voodoo."

The Wulf-Ace duo became a trio during production of issue No. 5, released in 1992 -- purportedly with the cremains of Shearer in the ink -- when Michael Botkin, a columnist for *The Bay Area Reporter*, San Francisco's oldest gay newspaper, was named "Your Sleazy Editor & Protector of the Streets." "Michael was very uninhibited, and he specialized in criticizing things," Ace says. "He once likened himself to the Hindu deity Shiva the destroyer." Botkin died of AIDS in August 1996 after completing issue No. 10. "We plan to have a page about Michael in our upcoming issue, another 'Darn, another one of our editors died' pieces."

Modeled on 'zines like *Thang*, a journal of black music, and Canada's *Bim-Box and Daddy, the Magazine*, and first produced, in truly underground fashion, surreptitiously on a photocopier in the basement at Stanford Medical Center, *DPN* is currently designed on "nothing but the next-to-the-latest digital publishing technology," has a 5,000-copy print run and claims some 1,500 subscribers. Ace estimates that 95 percent are gay men.

A quick flip through any issue tells why: Vignettes from VD clinics, tantalizing centerfolds of bare beefcake, helpful hints about condoms, lubes and dildos, a *Wine Spectator* -- meets -- *Consumer Reports* review of poppers and an arousing abundance of tumescent cartoon cocks poised to penetrate playful cartoon asses. There's Aunt Kaposi's "Advice for the Loveworn," which deals with issues of self-esteem by way of diarrhea and catheters. There's a mouth-watering profusion of fattening, easy-to-make recipes -- "Patricia Mae's Most Revolting Oysters," "Leuk-o-Plakia's Faceless Stroganoff" and "Robbie Mae's Gnarly Tofu Fruit Shake," to name a very few. There are the trials and tribulations of the rakish cartoon hero Captain Condom. And the riotous reviews by "Porn Potato," whose rating system is how many eyes (out of a possible five) The Long Rod of Justice, say, or Mein Kock can open.

Despite the mordant humor of the submissions, Ace is disappointed by the low volume. "Lately we haven't gotten many," he says, "but I think that's partly a reflection of the fact that lately we haven't published much." The "Meat Market" has been shut down owing to lack of advertisers, and centerfold boys are hard to snag. Although *DPN* has begun to print readers' letters, both Thorne and Ace complain that even this feedback is slim. But one letter delighted them so much that they printed a portion of it on the magazine's wrapper. Written by Carol A. Hale, the executive director of the Permian Basin AIDS Coalition in Odessa, Texas, the excerpt ran: "A publication such as yours is not the appropriate vehicle for teaching HIV prevention. Rather it encourages a freewheeling lifestyle which helped bring this disease to the epidemic proportions we are now facing."

While most *DPN* readers seemingly hold their tongues, Thorne and Ace do not. *DPN* has a lot to say about certain people -- and it's only fun to say things that are nasty. Not surprisingly,

everybody's favorite North Carolina senator, Jesse Helms, gets the lion's share of lampooning: The senator's sour mug is seen submerged, à la Andres Serrano, in a bottle of urine on the cover of issue No. 2, "Piss Jesse." Helms also graces the cover of No. 10, squatting naked, except for cowboy boots and hat, his anus stuffed with a half-pack of smoldering cigarettes. Other quarry on whom *DPN* declared perpetual open season include Roy Cohn and Kimberly Bergalis, recipients of the Golden Pariah Awards, as well as Louise Hay ("her philosophy is fucked"). Journalist Randy Shilts, because he resisted disclosing his HIV status even after his chronicle of the AIDS epidemic became a best-seller, is the object of a vehement editorial ("Why Does *DPN* Trash Our Newest Gay Saint?"), is unflatteringly depicted as Dorian Gray's portrait ("pure scathing Wulf," says Ace) and makes a cartoon cameo in Captain Condom ("If no one in the bathhouse will sleep with me, then no one in the bathhouse will sleep with anyone, ha ha! Close them down, I say! -- Where's my royalty check?"). But when it comes to heroes in the battle against AIDS, Thorne and Ace are notably reluctant to bestow medals.

Despite its virulent trashing of people like Helms, Shilts and others, *DPN* has provoked remarkably few negative reactions -- and no threats or lawsuits. "We want real good hate mail," says a disappointed Thorne. "Not 'You're going to hell!' That's boring. 'You'll be forgotten!' is much worse." But with its exalted cult status -- and in spite of its erratic appearances -- the trails *DPN* blazed are unlikely to be forgotten. "I had a problem with the way AIDS was perceived, even by people who had it, back in the mid-to-late '80s," says Scott O'Hara, a former porn star, ex-editor of *Steam* magazine and author of the *DPN* serial "How I Got AIDS: Memoirs of a Working Boy." "I like the lighthearted, morbid approach *DPN* took. It's important to keep a sense of humor about these things. Yeah, death is a big deal. But if you can't laugh at it, you're looking at it the wrong way."

Laughter may be one of life's most amusing affirmations, but *DPN* is emphatic that its most sublime celebration is lust. "The covers alone send people shrieking to the hills," Kevin Bentley says. "Most HIV publications tend to leave out sexuality, except to talk about safer sex. *DPN* was genuinely horny. People always asked, 'Man, where did you find it?'"

Yet just now the question is, Will you find it? With the publication of a new issue postponed for more than a year due to Thorne's bad health and "technical mishaps," rumors are rife that *The Diseased Pariah News* has laughed its last. But Ace says not: "We're close to finishing No. 11. Our concept is along the lines of 'Don't take your protease inhibitors, so we'll still have something to write about.'"

In fact, with all the protease reprieves from death row and media reports of the epidemic's end, even groupies gripe that *DPN* has done what it set out to do and now might be the time to pick up its cartoon characters and vitriol, its Hospice Barbie and KS Ken, and go home. "Most PWAs have learned to deal with the illness more positively than they were 10 years ago. *DPN*'s accomplished its goal. It's changed the way the disease is viewed, and that's wonderful," says O'Hara. "Frankly, the need for *DPN* is not as intense now." A Different Light's LaBonte disagrees. "We still get calls asking for the new *DPN*," he says. "In terms of sales, it has survived the real activist days in the Castro. It had a market beyond ACT UP."

The editors argue that *DPN* is as relevant today as in 1990. “Anyone who thinks that we’re close to the end of AIDS just isn’t involved in what’s going on,” Ace says. “They don’t have friends who failed the drugs. Or friends who have side effects. The drugs are not a walk in the park.” In Thorne’s world, people with HIV will always need the forum, fantasy and fun that *DPN* has furnished. “HIVers are still going to have an interest in their health, and they’ll continue to read their stools like tea leaves,” he says. Perhaps as much to the point, though today’s drugs may allow people with HIV to outlive their positive predecessors, they haven’t abolished the torments of the outcast -- the social stigma, emotional distress and outright discrimination -- that most continue to experience. “Yes, we’ll still be pariahs,” Thorne says, "and we’ll have things to talk about, and we’ll have so much more style than the diabetics. But when the world decides it doesn’t need *DPN*, we’ll shut it down. Such is life."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Last-Laughs-1754-5803