Mailbox

November 1, 2000

We Think We Created A Monster!

While I don't want to downplay the importance of disseminating information about those who knowingly spread HIV through unprotected sex, I was concerned by the cover picture and title ("The Making of Monsters") on the August 2000 issue and the message that it sends about African-American men. The media often perpetuates the myth that African-American men are threatening. Hence the disproportionate number of African-American men who are imprisoned or wrongly pulled over on the highways, or who receive long sentences based on their race not their crime. I'd rather have seen a cover photo that represented the diversity of those who spread the AIDS virus.

Kate Ryan Reiling
St. Paul, Minnesota

As an HIV positive African-American male and newly employed senior editor at *POZ*, I am deeply troubled by the magazine's portrayal of 23-year-old Nushawn Williams as a "monster" on our August 2000 cover. The sinister photo and blaring neon text smack of the sensationalized racist stereotype on Time magazine's controversial 1994 cover of an electronically darkened O.J. Simpson mugshot. Regardless of Williams' or Simpson's innocence or guilt, was either magazine's characterization fair? In *POZ*'s attempt to be provocative and push the envelope of journalism, all we really accomplished is to maintain the status quo.

LeRoy Whitfield
Senior Editor, *POZ*
New York City

There comes a time when an editor must decide if a story is such garbage that it isn't fit for print. "The Miseducation of Nushawn Williams" (August 2000) should have been one of those. Writer Lisa Kennedy expected us to feel sorry for this poor soul. She pointed out that Williams was just a teenager. But so were the girls he infected. I originally got tested 13 years ago because it was my responsibility not to infect my wife or a future child.

Hopefully, in the future, *POZ* will be more responsible to its readers and more compassionate to victims. Cancel my subscription.

Joel Hershey
Via the Internet

POZ responds: Perpetuating media stereotypes of black men is the last think we want to do. Rather than casting Williams simply as monster or victim, we attempted to portray him as who he is: a young person with HIV as confused and conflicted as anyone else infected. In "The Miseducation of Nushawn Williams" and "America's Most Unwanted" we tried to show that, in the eyes of the law in many parts of this country, all HIVers are demons—no matter what they do.

Prose And Cons

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for featuring me in the August 2000 "America's Most Unwanted" (clever title). It adds to my hopes of overturning my life sentence.

Brian Lepley
Nevada Dept. of Corrections
Lovelock, Nevada

The story about HIV criminalization was good, but the headline "America's Most Unwanted" was a really poor decision. I thought I was doing the right thing by trying to reach out to others through the article, but the choice of headline made me wonder. Did you stop to consider that I feel set apart because of my disease? The world already makes PWAs feel unwanted.

Naomi Morrison
Broward Correctional Institute
South Florida, Florida

Thank you for getting the truth out in "America's Most Unwanted." I know very well what happened to Eric Perez: He was railroaded because he has HIV.

Jac Ruckinger
Pennsylvania Dept. of Corrections
Huntingdon, Pennsylvania

I was thoroughly impressed by "America's Most Unwanted." Not only is criminalization an ineffective prevention strategy, but it undermines efforts to educate the public by suggesting that spitting and needle-sticks pose the same risk of HIV transmission as unprotected sex. POZ's research yielded accessible, thought-provoking info while at the same time providing a human face of those accused.

Jeanne Flavin, PhD
Assistant Professor of Sociology, Fordham University
New York City

I am No. 64 on the "HIV Crimeline" (August 2000). *POZ* did a terrific job with the article. I am still appealing my conviction. It's slow, but I remain optimistic. One of my favorite Bible scriptures is Psalms 46:10: "Be still and know that I am God." I am certainly still, so I spend my days waiting on the courts and getting to know God. POZ keeps me informed. It helps me know that I am not alone.

Philip Carter
Mississippi Dept. of Corrections

Parchman, Mississippi

I am the main woman Pierre Weaver was talking about in “America’s Most Unwanted.” I was outraged that you used my HIV to make thousands of other HIVers feel sorry for that son of a bitch. [Contrary to what you reported] I did not test positive until two months after our yearlong relationship. Weaver has never shown any remorse. He told you nothing but lies. You should get both sides of a story. There’s no telling how many lives I saved by getting him locked up, and I’ll be at his parole hearing to make sure he never sees the light of day. People who do not disclose should be punished to the full extent of the law.

Renee Broyles
Fort Smith, Arkansas

POZ responds: We researched both sides, found discrepancies and reported the version that came out in the trial. A subsequent police report backs up Broyles’ version.

Auntie Blame

I feel compelled to write about the August 2000 Editor’s Letter about disclosure. After nearly 20 years of HIV being part of our consciousness, it is very evident that one should take responsibility to protect oneself, as well as stop playing the victim and blaming others.

As a sexually active gay male, I tested for HIV regularly for years. In August 1996, I tested negative. That December, I was admitted to the hospital with HIV symptoms: I had in fact been positive. (My doctors and I later concluded that I’d been infected in June 1996.) Immediately, my thoughts drifted to the numerous unprotected sexual encounters I’d had in the four months during which I boasted of a negative status. I can safely conclude that some of my partners ultimately tested positive as a result.

How many men did I infect? None. In my opinion, they infected themselves, just as I infected myself by choosing to allow a partner to fuck me without a condom. I didn’t hunt him down after my diagnosis. That was irrelevant. I’d given up my personal power to another individual with the expectation that he would disclose his status. I certainly believe in allowing my partner to make an informed sexual decision. But one must assume everyone is positive and proceed accordingly. Perhaps it is past time to stop demanding that our beloved, beleaguered HIV positive community take full responsibility for all of society’s potential infections.

Donnie Caruso
Dallas

Needling Fox

“21st-Century Fox” (August 2000) was most encouraging. I hope Jamie Fox will speak out for federal funding of needle-exchange programs as he leads AIDS Action in new directions. It’s time for the federal government to support effective prevention in the area now responsible for half of all new HIV infections: injecting-drug use.

Dawn Day

Dogwood Center
Princeton, New Jersey

Gem Of An Idea

Far too much is expected from pharmaceutical companies (“Cheap Shots,” August 2000). Of course, they are wealthy enough to foot a great portion of the $3 billion to $10 billion that African countries need in order to fight AIDS, but other major profit-absorbing corporations have responsibilities in this effort, too. The diamond-mining company DeBeers extracts billions of dollars from the African continent, yet nobody is calling them to the table. Other companies that extract resources and profits from Africa should partner up with the pharmaceuticals to pay.

Michael J. Harney, Jr.
Asheville, North Carolina

The Real Skinny

Thank you, Griffin Shea, for pointing out the double standard for gay and straight men (“Skin to Skin,” August 2000). Stephen Gendin was demonized after he wrote in “Riding Bareback” (May 1997) that he was HIV positive and having unsafe sex with other positive guys. Yet when straight HIV positive boxer Tommy Morrison bragged about having unsafe sex with his negative wife (“Jesus will protect her,” he said), no one said a word. I’m not defending or attacking anyone’s choices, but I’m sick and tired of the hypocrisy.

Carmine Tronolone
New York City

Great Minds Fink Alike

California taxpayers are spending thousands of dollars on the trial of ACT UP/San Francisco members for “illegal shoving” (“Arch Enemies,” August 2000). I’m sure that grade school children throughout the nation are breathlessly awaiting the outcome. If the ACT UP boys are found guilty, what’s next? Jail sentences for cheating at dodge ball? Calling ACT UP/SF’s provocative actions “violent” is an insult to true victims of brutality.

Also, it bothered me to read that an ACT UP/SF member shouted “You faggots deserve to die” [sic] during the group’s disruption of a Project Inform event. Dave Pasquarelli, one of the defendants, has given me his personal assurance that this never happened.

David Fink
San Francisco

As ACT UP/SF says, put your money where your mouth is: Produce a single study proving that HIVers who aren’t taking the drugs are dying. Even the World Health Organization doesn’t have such a study! People who are HIV positive and not taking the drugs are the ones living long, healthy lives—unlike cocktail recipients. Prove me wrong.

Greg Drolette
Los Angeles

POZ responds: For an in-depth look at these and other ACT UP/SF provocations, see "The Boys in the Band" in our October 2000 issue.

Doubting Thomas

In a piece in POZ's AIDS in Asia issue (July 2000), longtime treatment advocate Joe Thomas, PhD, called on international AIDS organizations to form more equitable partner-ships with local communities when developing policies and programs, and issued a warning that drug-industry sponsorship may lead groups into conflicts of interests over access and other issues ("PWAs Before Profits," page 81). Thomas singled out one agency—Britain's International HIV/ AIDS Alliance, which partners with many AIDS groups worldwide—as doing a particularly poor job. He charged that the group doesn't support global efforts to lower the prices of AIDS drugs; that it signed a consensus statement, published in The Lancet, arguing against the global campaign to lower HIV drug prices; that it develops positions on drug pricing without consulting people in developing countries; and that it doesn't involve local communities in program development.

In response to the article, POZ received letters from seven well-known organizations unanimously calling Thomas' characterization of the Alliance unfair and inaccurate. Due to space constraints, we can only reprint four of these letters below. (The other three came from Medecins san Frontieres, the Australian Federation of AIDS Organizations and India's Y.R. Gaitonde Medical Educations and Research Foundation.)

The facts, as best as we can ascertain, are these:

The International HIV/AIDS Alliance has not, as Thomas correctly reported, signed onto any major global campaign to reduce the prices of specific HIV drugs. However, Thomas is mistaken that The Lancet article argued against the global campaign to lower the price of meds. As for the alliance's involvement with local communities in the development of policies and programming, the organizations we heard from report a very different experience from Thomas'. POZ regrets not only the factual error but the lack of balance in this piece.

Those of us involved in AIDS international issues welcomed POZ's focus on Asia. We object, however, to the unsubstantiated assault on the International HIV/AIDS Alliance. It is not supported by the facts, including The Lancet article cited. That article, written two years ago, highlighted the inequalities in treatment access. It did not argue for the current global price structure. Organizations such as the alliance did HIV capacity-building work around the world long before it was trendy, and they are a valuable resource in a
global battle.

Joseph Scheich
Global Network of People Living with HIV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

I read with surprise the accusations [against one of our funders, the International HIV/AID Alliance] in Joe Thomas' "PWAs Before Profits" (July 2000). We are the only AIDS nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Cambodia that directly supports community groups, including the first

independent PWA group here, Vithey Chivit. We work with 35 other small NGOs, helping locals like us to build our organizations. We work with the Cambodian Ministry of Health in an innovative HIV home-care program which has campaigned for better medication to be made available here. Perhaps in addition to "a code of ethical conduct" for international AIDS groups, there should be one for international magazines to prevent such misrepresentations of developing countries' efforts to manage AIDS.

Pok Panhavichet
Executive Director, Khmer HIV/AIDS Alliance
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

We take exception to the accusation that the International HIV/AIDS Alliance does not involve the local community. We've been a partner of the alliance since 1994. The alliance has consistently respected our autonomy in addressing HIV according to our own social-cultural situation. With its encouragement, our organization has pursued its commitment to Pinoy Plus—a self-help group of Filipinos with HIV. With support from the alliance, many communities around the Philippine archipelago approach HIV prevention in a participatory way.

Ruthy D. Libatique
Executive Director, Philippine HIV/AIDS NGO Support Program
Quezon City, Philippines

I have had a long relationship with the International HIV/AIDS Alliance and many of its employees, and Joe Thomas' attack is simply inaccurate. To my knowledge, the alliance has consistently supported campaigns to lower the prices of HIV drugs and has certainly striven to build the closest possible links with local community organizations. The legitimate debate on the role of northern donors working with southern communities is not helped by wild assertions and attacks by people who seem to have hidden agendas.

Dennis Altman
Professor of Politics
La Trobe University
Melbourne, Australia

Nuts To You

The answer to Martin Delaney's burning question as to whether San Francisco has gone nuts or not ("Arch Enemies," August 2000) is a definite yes! I just wish these ACT UP/San Francisco idiots would either keep it in their pants or inform their partners/ tricks/johns of their "decision" that HIV doesn't cause AIDS before they ruin some unsuspecting person's life. I can understand treatment fatigue and the loss of the past 20 years into the HIV abyss. I buried my lover in 1992; he died a death I wouldn't wish on anyone.

If these "AIDS dissidents" choose not to deal with the reality of AIDS, fine with me. We don't need them in the gene pool. Get over it: AIDS is real.

Corrections: In "Change of Heart" (September 2000), amprenavir was identified as having the

trade name Ziagen. In fact, the trade name is Agenerase (both are marketed by Glaxo Wellcome).

In the July 2000 issue in "POZ in Asia," Paul Toh was identified as the founder of APN+. He actually cofounded the PWA network with Jack Jagjit Singh in 1994. POZ regrets the errors.

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