Manifesto Destiny

Kiki wants to live -- by any means necessary

June 1, 1996 By Kiki Mason

After reading *Primary Colors*, I have been inspired to cop to something that I wrote anonymously two years ago. In June 1994 I was approached by members of the Marys, an ACT UP affinity group renowned for their colorful and creative actions. The Gay Games were coming to New York City, coinciding with the 25th anniversary of Stonewall, and we were all bracing for the descent of upward of half a million screaming gay tourists from around the world. Based on the advance propaganda for both events, the Marys and many other thinking people felt like they were in for a week that would ignore or sweep under the rug the very real problems that gay people face, like AIDS.

The idea of such a large extravaganza while so many were suffering struck me personally as a bit tasteless, and you know how I am about good taste. Anyway, the Marys had decided to do a tract: Something that would look like an officially sanctioned brochure but would blow the out-of-towners' little minds when they actually read it. The Marys asked several people to write down their thoughts. Being a closet Ché Guevara fan, I chose a manifesto. Here it is:

I am someone with AIDS and I want to live by any means necessary.

I am not dying; I am being murdered. Just as surely as if my body was being tossed into a gas chamber, I am being sold down the river by people within this community who claim to be helping people with AIDS. Hang your heads in shame while I point my finger at you. "Activists" now negotiate with drug companies just as the Jewish councils in the Warsaw ghettos of World War II negotiated with the Nazis. "Give us a few lives today," they insist, "and we'll trade you even more tomorrow." AIDS careerists -- both HIV positive and HIV negative- -- have exchanged their anger for an invitation to the White House. It is their megalomania and the illusion of power that buys the silence of these so-called community leaders. And where does that leave the rest of us? We're left fighting for our lives while a group of well-educated, affluent white "homo-sexuals" sit on community boards and advisory councils while we're left to die on the streets.

Our service organizations are a joke. Gay Men's Health Crisis? With all their money and clout, all you get is a free lunch, group therapy and free counseling via my favorite question, "Have you made out your will yet?" AmFAR? It hasn't funded clinical trials in two years, and when it did, the studies were pathetic. AmFAIL is more like it. Or, how about the AIDS Inaction Council?

Jewish leaders established organizations to run their ghettos -- and we do the same -- in a desperate attempt to gain some control over a living nightmare. Everyone is selling you out. We refuse to plead with the U.S. government or negotiate with the entire medical-industrial complex for our lives. We have to get what we need by any means necessary.

A wealthy, well-connected hetero friend recently said to me, “I’m amazed that you guys haven’t turned to terrorism yet -- everybody’s afraid of you anyway. Why not use that fear to save yourselves?” Make no mistake. This is what we’re left with. If you choose to negotiate your life away with scumbags, fine. But I’m going out fighting. This is my message to everyone with AIDS: If you think the end is near, take someone with you. Hold the president of a drug company hostage. Splatter your blood across the desk of a politician. Trash an AIDS researcher’s home. When some silly-assed, blow-dried, brain-dead TV reporter asks you a stupid question about living with AIDS, spit in his face. Call the police and tell them you’ve put LSD in the water supply in retaliation for our genocide. Do it so they’ll know what it’s like to have your life ripped apart.

Unfortunately, we are a “gentle, loving people.” Many of us lack the strength and conviction required for these brave actions. A friend of mine said the other day that as long as we were threatening a drug company, get him into its compassionate-use drug trial: “I’m so tired of what we have to do to stay alive.” Me, too, baby. Me, too. But do it we must.

To all you supportive HIV negatives: I call on you to make this sacrifice as well. This is not just tough talk. I truly believe that the current state of AIDS will not change unless radical steps are taken immediately. If you don’t believe me, then take a good, hard look at the war on cancer.

Creating terror is not just screaming, making an artistic statement or getting in touch with your anger. True anger is not a flame. True anger is ice. True anger is calm and sure. It does not require legions of people to succeed. It requires determination as strong as steel. An act of terror can be large or small, innately personal or massively public. Let’s use our queerist gift -- creativity -- to Do the Right Thing. I know some of you are shaking your heads as you read this. Many of you will no doubt shrug it off. Go ahead. But remember, I want to live. By any means necessary.

Fifty thousand of these brochures were handed out during that week, which turned out to be an even bigger nightmare than I had expected. As I struggled to navigate the hordes of drunk steroid queens who had taken over my normally placid Greenwich Village neighborhood, I was really glad that I had written this. At least we tried, and even when I’m spitting in the wind, I don’t believe in falling down on my beliefs.

What I wrote probably seems quite extreme and offensive to many people, or ungrateful and wrong to those who are trying to help us. We have so few friends that criticism of any kind often seems wanton and destructive. But the road to hell really is paved with good intentions. Two years later I see even more burnout as what’s left of our organizations struggle to get by and raise the dough, a task that becomes more and more egregious with each passing day. Once I went on *The Phil Donahue Show* and made the statement that one of AmFAR’s biggest problems was that it had lost the support of the gay community while gays continued to be AIDS’ largest source of funding.

Well, the audience and Phil went crazy. “That’s divisive,” snapped good old liberal Phil, and a woman from the development arm of GMHC got up and started berating me: “Sixty percent of our donor base are women, most of whom are straight.” Which is true. Since we had to go to a commercial, I wasn’t able to say to her, “Yes, I know this. These are women who have watched you help a good friend, a gay man, die, and are moved enough to send a check. Your other money comes from bequests.” When I told several fundraisers about this part of the show, they laughed bitterly. “Of course you were telling the truth,” said one. “Most of the money comes from affected communities. The truth is, most straight people could care less if we all dropped dead.”

A guy named James Wentzy asked me if he could make a short film out of my manifesto. I said sure. He had this very butch, cloney guy reading the words with his face superimposed on old films of bulldozers plowing thousands of corpses into mass graves after World War II. It was totally what I was talking about. He showed the film at a gay film festival. I wasn’t there, but a friend said that at first the audience got real quiet, then there was a shifting, and by the middle of the film, people were standing up and screaming, “Preach, sister! Preach!” So I guess somebody liked what I had to say.

AmFAR is now desperately trying to get its house in order after years of ducking any criticism. I really hope that the reorganization and Sharon Stone do the trick. We need an AmFAR. AmFAR also needs more board members and staff with HIV. I mean, three out of 30 is a bit weak. I don’t want to destroy AIDS organizations. I want them to get stronger and more representative of us.

Which leads me back to us as people with AIDS. You see, we are partially to blame. We let others do for us. We don’t demand access or accountability. We don’t speak out. We allow ourselves to be portrayed as grateful, weak little victims. And you know that I know what a goddamned struggle we all go through just to stay alive. I have been terribly ill for five months. This past winter was the worst time of my life. I was just in the hospital for two days, and the bastards nearly killed me. But you know what? I never stopped screaming or questioning. I checked myself out and I came home, and for the first time in all of this, I really, really wanted to die.

My doctor, Joe Sonnabend, came over. He held me and I cried and we talked about death. I told him that I would try one more time. The past two weeks have been a nightmare of chemo -- starting the Abbott protease inhibitor at the same time, which made me so sick -- and bringing myself back from the edge of the grave. I called my doctor one day and said, “Why don’t you just get a hammer and bash in my skull?”

But you know what? I’m getting better, and I’m not dead yet. So even though it hurts, I want all of us to keep pushing them, those who say that they are doing it for us. Keep pushing.

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