Mean Streets

March 1, 1999 By Gabi Horn

NYPD crackdown on PWA activism

Little love has been lost between the New York Police Department and the city's activists with HIV. But two incidents last fall marked what may be a new level of animus in Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's official relations with his city's empowered PWAs. It all began in October, when a rowdy 6,000-strong march to protest the murder of gay Wyoming student Matthew Shepard spilled into the rush-hour midtown streets, drawing a massive NYPD response and ending in 136 arrests, numerous injuries and multiple lawsuits against the city by pissed-off PWAs. Due to a policy that orders meds confiscated upon arrest, five PWAs spent 19 hours in custody with no access to their antiretrovirals. "By the time I missed my second dose, I was scared for my life," said John Irizarry, 28. "I'm on salvage therapy: If my virus becomes resistant, there's nothing else I can take." Besides compensation for the missed doses -- "which cannot be replaced if the virus breaks through," noted Irizarry's doc, Paul Bellman -- the plaintiffs are pushing for a court-ordered change in the NYPD's pill policy. At presstime, the suit was pending.

Then, in November, local AIDS group Housing Works sued the city after PWAs were denied the right to commemorate World AIDS Day on the steps of City Hall. Federal Judge Harold Baer Jr. ruled in Housing Works' favor -- and against officials who claimed that the threat of terrorism forces it to close the steps to events not of "extraordinary public interest." Noting a recent city-sponsored rally at the same location, Baer wrote: "Who's to say that celebrating the Yankees' World Series victory is a more or less extraordinary event than World AIDS Day? After all, it's estimated that 30.6 million people are living with HIV worldwide." Despite the courtroom coup, December 1 proved tense for those greeted at City Hall with snipers, metal detectors and hundreds of cops. "Giuliani came onto the steps and instructed police to construct barricaded pens to corral us through," said Housing Works' Charles King. "That he thinks 200 PWAs demonstrating in front of City Hall represents a terrorist threat is disgusting."

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