Memento Mori

June 1, 2001 By Esther Kaplan

An exhibit looks back on the epidemic through its ephemera. Esther Kaplan speaks with two keepers of the flame, who hope their "living" archive lights some new fires.

In a stack on a desk in this borrowed office are faded copies of the long-defunct *New York Native*, the issue on top announcing "Cancer in the Gay Community." Tacked to the wall is a small, plain pamphlet, *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic*, a prevention strategy designed by and for gay men in 1993, several months before HIV was even identified. Nearby, a wrinkled plastic hospital bag that held one PWA's belongings in 1984, and a pile of video interviews with others now dead. This is where photographer Jane Rosett and her girlfriend, videographer Jean Carlomusto, are creating *AIDS: A Living Archive*, a multimedia timeline that will premiere at the Museum of the City of New York on April 21 (through September 10) in conjunction with the 20th anniversary of GMHC -- and the 20th year of AIDS. *POZ* spoke with the documentarians-cum-AIDS activists (Rosett cofounded the PWA Coalition, Carlomusto was an early ACT UPer) on the eve of the opening.

***POZ*: Is it painful to be left behind to bear witness?**

Jean Carlomusto: As I went down into the archives to make selections, the same old ghosts came back, and all this blame: "Oh, why wasn't I around when you were really sick and dying?" But eventually I broke past that, just letting people's teachings come through, making sure they are still heard, even though they're not physically present. That was liberating. It's no longer a burden, but an honor. We're cobbling together a history out of the absences.

Jane Rosett: When people say, "Oh, isn't it so depressing," it's a projection of their own fear of death. I mean, we used to edit the PWAC *Newsline* in the ICU. Once we were audited, and Albert Graham, our comptroller, was in the hospital with dementia, so I brought the IRS guy into Beth-Israel, and Albert reached out and yelled, "Mommy!" The guy was like, This is your comptroller? [*Laughter*.] Somehow the professionalization of AIDS, which is seen as a measure of progress, has also served to erase the camp, humor and radical origins of the AIDS movement, and deluded people into thinking the crisis is over.

JC: We're trying to recall both the climate that made it possible for this strange disease to grow out of control and the origins of the organized resistance.

***POZ*: Did you anticipate this role?**

JC: No! Back then we really did believe that we were going to stop the epidemic. It was devastating to look around and realize that all of these people were dead.

JR: It was just paralyzing. Never for one minute did I think, “I’m going to be here and no one else is.” *Never*. But denial and survival are inextricably linked. There are actions we took that, if we had ever thought about the consequences, we never would have taken. Stuffing acyclovir into Tampax and smuggling a 45-kilo bag into Colombia -- I could have never seen the outside of a prison!

***POZ*: So what kind of moment are we in now?**

JC: I spent Christmas eve at the bedside of a friend who died on Christmas day. That kind of throwback was very emotional. Why the history is so important to me right now is that we’re seeing the point at which the cocktails are starting to fail us. It’s important to start reorganizing, and those of us who have anything left have to try to bring it back out.

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