Ms. Thurman Goes to Washington

The AIDS czar has activism in her blood and ice in her bra

November 1, 1998 By Jane Rosett

Just 24 hours before I met Sandra Thurman at the White House Office of National AIDS Policy, the czar was zapped! Ten members of the National Coalition to Save Lives Now! had gone and chained themselves to her desk, demanding that she call for a reversal of the president's ban on federal needle-exchange funding (see *POZ*arazzi).

This was in July, but I've been running into Sandy since 1985, at such AIDS activist hot spots as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where we protested mandatory HIV testing. Thurman, 45, began her career in the prison system, counseling young offenders about to be paroled. Her 15 years of AIDS work began by providing respite care to friends and organizing collection cans in Atlanta gay bars. In 1988, she joined AID Atlanta as director of public affairs and one year later was named executive director. When Bill Clinton ran for president in 1992, Thurman took a leave to do high-level campaign work. After that there were four years of policy work at the Carter Center, an Atlanta think tank, and a short stint at the U.S. Information Agency. Since last spring, as director of the Office of National AIDS Policy, Thurman has struggled to keep sound AIDS policy afloat in DC's toxic political tide.

Jane Rosett: So, Ms. Thurman goes to Washington.

Sandra Thurman: More like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. As much as I thought I'd be able to stay out of politics, no matter how much I wanted to focus on social-justice issues when I worked in the prison system and in health care, I couldn't implement the programs I wanted without the political piece. Policy in and of itself is good, but it's politics that pushes our ideas into reality, and that was a hard realization for me. So I wound up in Washington.

What happened in your office yesterday [July 20]?

Some colleagues who came to meet with me about needle exchange decided to change the agenda and take over the office, chain themselves to my desk and protest the administration's position on needle exchange. They were angry but peaceful, and the Secret Service officers were respectful and calm. It was just a good, old-fashioned protest.

Still, I was shocked because I've worked with them for a long time. I've always had an open-door

policy, and they know I support needle exchange. But they want me to denounce the administration's policy and publicly criticize my boss—the president—and I'm not willing to do that. Do I agree with him? No. But do I support him? Absolutely.

What was it like to be zapped at your own desk?

It was hard for me to be on this side of the fence when people are engaging in an act of civil disobedience. Certainly most of my life has been spent as an activist, and I still consider myself an activist even though I sit—at the moment—in a bureaucracy. It was painful to be the recipient of the anger of those on the frontlines of AIDS—that's where I've spent the majority of my time in this fight.

How did you first become involved in the epidemic?

In the early '70s, my then-husband and I opened a gay bar in Atlanta. Our partner and dear friend was one of the first people we knew to die of AIDS. We were devastated by his death—little did we know that was just the beginning. Early in the epidemic I provided respite care to friends whose loved ones were sick. My father was involved in the fashion industry and my mother was involved in the arts—we had a lot of gay friends who became infected. I went from respite care to fundraising.

I'm a fourth-generation activist. My mother was involved in the civil rights and women's movements. My maternal grandmother, an activist in civil rights and prison reform, managed to have prisoners in Georgia taken out of the cages and balls-and-chains they were kept in. And my great-grandmother had the audacity to think that all children, black and white, should have access to equal education—a fairly radical thought in North Georgia.

You've been the administration's most vocal supporter of needle exchange. Do you think the protestors figured you were the most accessible target?

I pledged from the beginning to directly connect this White House office to the community. We've met with all the activists whether they agreed with us or not.

The downside is that when you're accessible, you're an easy target. And I've been advised, even by people in the AIDS community, not to be as accessible as I am. They feel it might be more appropriate for me to be a little more aloof and sort of senior-staffish-like—whatever that is. I understand their argument but I don't operate that way, I never have, and I won't in this position. Once I feel like I have to pull away from the people who are actually doing the work, I think it's time for me to go.

What can we do now about needle exchange?

We need to spend time as advocates educating people at the community level, educating members of Congress and people in the churches—anybody we can get our hands on about what

needle exchange is and isn't.

There's still a lot of confusion about what happens in a needle-exchange program. We're not just talking about giving people needles and letting them do drugs. We're talking about seizing a very important opportunity to engage and develop a relationship with hard-core addicts, who I think we otherwise wouldn't have a chance to get into treatment and care. It's pretty simple, and it also gets needles off the street.

The science is very clear that the programs do work, and they don't increase or encourage drug use.

How do you deal with the perpetual conundrum of politics driving public health?

We have to do public health in a political context. To think we can make any kind of law outside of politics is naïve. So every day I have to weigh what I can do to help us move good policies forward.

How do you release the frustrations of your job?

Take lots of Advil. Drink a lot of Merlot. Cuss a whole lot. I'm really never away from my job! But I like to relax by riding horses, antiquing, listening to opera, cooking huge Southern meals for all my surrogate children and spending time with friends who have nothing to do with AIDS.

You went on the Washington, DC, AIDS Ride III from North Carolina to DC. How was it?

It was fabulous, but I don't think I realized what a long expedition it would be. There's no way to train for the heat of June, so you end up drinking more water than you ever thought you could stand and stuffing ice down your bra. It ain't pretty, but it works!

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