Never A Dull Momentum

February 1, 2000 By Clifford Chase

I hurried into the Manhattan Toy Center ballroom to hear the evening's featured speaker, Star Jones of ABC's The View. Her voice was booming out of the sound system, but aside from those nearest to the podium, few were listening. In this cavernous space the cocktail chatter roared. Jones appeared immaculate in a filmy, black sequined dress, but she wasn't happy. "If you think AIDS can't touch you, just keep on talking," she said. And they did. Above the din, Jones spoke of "news fatigue over this disease." She recalled losing her first cousin to AIDS, her best friend from childhood, her prom date. Still the guests continued talking. "You are not too sexy for AIDS," she said, with an edge.

Jones was hosting October's annual "Tastings" dinner and silent auction, a benefit for Momentum, a New York City group that provides meals and services to people with HIV. The 900 guests had paid as much as $250 each to bid on donated items and taste dishes from some of the city's swankiest restaurants. Along with Jones, celebrity guests included 14 soap stars eager to lend their names and faces to the cause, which would raise $100,000.

After Jones, Momentum E.D. Dawn Bryan took the podium. "I'd love to have your attention," she began. The crowd kept buzzing. "Thank you," she said. She mentioned "serving those who are neglected, isolated and disenfranchised," and then broke off. "Could I have your attention, please?" she said sharply. A slight lowering of volume. "Thank you."

Just then I saw a tall, platinum-blond drag queen pushing her way through the crowd, hurrying to escape. She looked disgusted. I thought to myself, "The tranny will tell it like it is." I caught up with her in the lobby, near the grand piano. I asked if she was leaving. "No, why?" Puzzled, I looked closer and saw that her full lips had been painted into a permanent pout.

This, along with her heart-shaped sunglasses, told me to lighten up. In a fierce New York accent she told me her name was Zondra Foxx and she was a Tastings regular. "Everybody knows Zondra," she rasped. She's also a donor: Each year she gave an Oriental carpet for the auction, since she was an antiques dealer "in the real world, such as it is." I asked how I should refer to her. "Drag queen, transsexual, chick with dick—I don't care," she said.

A similar pragmatism characterized everyone from Momentum. The senior staff seemed to regard Tastings as a necessary evil. "This event doesn't give you any sense of Momentum," said Leroy Sharer, board chair, adding that he hoped I'd visit one of their sites.

Andrea Vinet, a nurse with Momentum since May, displayed the same mix of idealism and realism. As soon as she smiled at me, I knew clients must love her. “I’ve been involved with HIV since 1981,” she said. “I was a Girl Scout before I was a nurse,” she said. “I like taking something overwhelming and breaking it down.”

Just then there was a crash, only a few feet away. A valuable auction item? “I’m not even going to look,” Vinet said with a laugh. Clearly she knew how to pick her battles.

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