Next-Door Neighbor

Louise Binder has a lot to say about AIDS activism, Canadian-style.

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“Canadians don’t interrupt functions,” she says. “We’re far too polite. But we do speak out at functions.” The difference involves purchasing a ticket rather than gate-crashing, which is precisely what Binder did at a luncheon where Canada’s Prime Minister Jean Chrétien was to announce an upcoming election. “I didn’t burst in, I burst out,” Binder says, recalling how she and a fellow PWA stood up to address the crowd of 1,000 Canadian policymakers and plead for the renewal of Canada’s AIDS initiative. “I said ’Please’ -- as I always would -- ’please renew the National AIDS Strategy!’”

Binder and her cohort were immediately surrounded by Royal Canadian Mounted Police, but the prime minister got their message, and that of many other Canadian activists, and shortly after announced that the National AIDS Strategy will continue. The hotel that hosted the luncheon was less accommodating: They threatened to have Binder and her partner-in-crime arrested for trespassing if they ever set foot on the premises again. “Here are two women with AIDS,” she says, laughing. “You’re not going to scare us with a trespassing charge.”

Not much scares Binder, 48, though her HIV diagnosis came as a shock, an unexpected result from a routine physical in 1993. (Her ex-husband -- whom she divorced in the early ’90s -- has since died of AIDS.) Despite her impulse to-ward a proper demeanor, the closet was never an option. “I couldn’t imagine keeping a huge part of my life to myself. It would drive me crazy.”

So the former labor lawyer became an activist. “I’m not ashamed, I’m mad,” she says, channeling her anger into her work for the Toronto People with AIDS Foundation, the Canadian Treatment Advocates Council, the HIV-AIDS Legal Clinic of Ontario and the Community Research Initiative of Toronto.

For her work on behalf of women with AIDS -- Binder serves as chair of Voices of Positive Women -- she was awarded Toronto’s Constance Hamilton Award. “We’re going to see an explosion in the numbers of women infected in North America,” she says. “Women with HIV need more treatment information. If you can’t stay healthy, so much else just doesn’t count.”

Thanks to her current cocktail of Crixivan, d4T and 3TC, Binder’s viral load is undetectable, and her CD4 count -- which bottomed out at 30 -- is in the 300 range. Not that she takes her good health for granted. “Never, for one second, am I unaware of having HIV.”

Given the courage of her convictions, Binder is likely to find herself once again surrounded by Mounties in the not-too-distant future. “I know what I want on my tombstone,” she says, quoting: “’Here lies the only person other than a politician who made a career out of making pronouncements on things she knew nothing about.’”

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