Not Your Average Joe

From “outstanding” to “tragic hero” to “cuckoo,” Sonnabend’s an original

July 1, 1998 By Staff

Richard Berkowitz, Journalist
Joe has been my doctor for 20 years. Knowing how important sex was to me, in 1982 he told me, “Don’t get any more sperm inside your rectum and I think you’ll be OK.” In the darkest days of panic and despair, he handed me hope. Then in 1987, everywhere you turned, the unrelenting message was to run and get your AZT -- but Joe convinced me to stay off the bandwagon. His eternal optimism with respect to surviving an AIDS diagnosis with quality of life, dignity and a healthy sexual appetite has a slut like me welcoming the new millennium with more CD4 cells than I had in 1983.

Dr. Robert Gallo, Virologist
Sonnabend introduced the epidemic to many scientists. While initially we sat on two opposite poles, we’re now studying the same thing. We got off on the wrong foot because of his original beliefs about the virus, but he is long beyond that now -- he knows HIV causes AIDS.

Spencer Cox, Treatment Action Group
Joe is an iconoclast, but unlike other less-informed rebels, he’s not unsusceptible to data. The most important thing I learned from him is the scientific mindset: Look at the evidence, figure out what it means, and decide what’s missing. And he’s taught that mindset to many other AIDS advocates and doctors as well.

Dr. Peter Duesberg, Molecular biologist
Sonnabend was one of the first to question the HIV hypothesis. For that he should be commended. But he lost dearly: His lab, his influence, his editorship -- he became an outcast in the AIDS community. Lately he’s become fairly critical of me. He’s found a more middle ground and developed a new, more “multifaceted” hypothesis. I’m not condemning him. There is such pressure to conform -- people give in after a while. I give him credit for raising his voice, but I’m disappointed he didn’t follow through.

Gabriel Rotello, Author
Sonnabend is one of the most important people in the history of AIDS prevention. He helped invent safe sex as we know it. Having done that, he’s saved more lives of more gay men than anyone.

For that he deserves a place of honor. We followed his advice as best we could at the time, but if we had followed it earlier, I believe the outcome of the epidemic would have been less tragic.

Mathilde Krim, AmFAR cofounder
What did Sonnabend contribute? He contributed me. He was the one who alerted me to the problem. I remember the day in the early ’80s when Joe came to me and said, “;I’ve lost my stature as a physician. I have patients with big lymph nodes and high fevers, and they don’t get better. What’s strange is they’re all young, gay men.”; He’s the only doctor I know who goes to every funeral. From the beginning, Joe said the government was wrong to give money to academic clinical research -- people who had no contact with the disease.

Marisa Cardinale, CRIA former director
Joe’s safe-sex piece with Callen and Berkowitz was one of the first times that people who were gay and affected by AIDS spoke out. It was extremely unpopular at the time, but it started the ball rolling toward early prevention. He clearly inspired me as well as some of the more dedicated activists who have focused their lives on AIDS. What was he like to work with? I don’t think I should comment on that.

Laurie Garrett, Journalist
Joe has a very strong sense of conscience. He has pushed and prodded and provoked the medical community to put the patients first. From the back of the room at esoteric virology conferences, he would get up and yell, “;Hey, what about the patients?”; His theories haven’t always been correct, and he’s always had a style that could be off-putting. Basically, he is what he is, and you either dig it or you don’t. But he doesn’t make it easy.

Randolph Wicker, Activist
Some years ago I had a $2 million medical policy and a lover dying of AIDS. In the hospitals, doctors would come in for five minutes and charge us $250. Joe was a completely different story. He came all the way out to Jersey and wouldn’t let me pay him anything. He’s the kind of doctor who gives medicine a noble name, but he’s not the kind of guy you’d notice in a crowd. But when he used to walk in AIDS marches, people would applaud when he went by. He is a living saint.

Celia Farber, Journalist
I sat next to Joe at the 1993 Berlin conference when the Concorde results were announced. And all the AIDS kings were lined up at the podium -- Martin Delaney, somebody from TAG and a few hard-core AZT doctors. They kept using all the buzzwords: reassessment, confusion. And Joe was livid. “;You bastards,”; he muttered under his breath. “;There was never any confusion. You’re the ones who caused the confusion. God, they’re all so dishonest.”; “;Say it,”; I whispered. “;Stand up and say it, Joe.”; And he almost did, but he didn’t. That’s the thing about Joe. He always forgives them. Almost like a parent would. The tragedy -- in the purest sense of the word -- of the AIDS epidemic is recorded in him. But who can he tell it to?

Dr. Anthony Fauci, NIAID director
Joe has been there from the very beginning. He is one of the true soldiers in the war against HIV. He is a model for a real translation of care to the patient. In terms of the controversy surrounding his work, I think, in general, at the end of the day, most would agree that his contributions have been positive. He is an outstanding man.

Xavier Morales, Sean Strub's partner
Joseph Sonnabend is cuckoo -- like Einstein.

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