On Native Ground

An HIV heretic hails Charles Orleb, hero

May 1, 1997 By Celia Farber

Joseph Pulitzer once said, “A newspaper should have no friends.” This dictum serves as the perfect epitaph for the recently disintegrated *New York Native.* The paper was unsparing in its indictment of every aspect of the government’s AIDS agenda. There exists no better illustration of how friendless the *Native* was than the fact that ACT UP led a boycott against it, formalizing years of antagonism from the very community the *Native* sought to inform. The feeling was mutual. "Those *wimps,*" publisher Chuck Ortleb quipped in a recent phone conversation. “With their little fists in the air.” He let out a short, despairing laugh.

The buzzwords that come up in respnse to questions about the *Native* are predictable: *Irresponsible, sensationalistic, paranoid,* and *loony.* But these judgments lack context. They spring from an unbridgeable rift between those who trust the AIDS leadership and those who do not. The view of the universe that makes the *Native* paranoid rests securely in the belief--and I stress *belief*--that the AIDS community is in good hands. I sympathize with the hearts that must believe it is, in order to have the courage to go on. I, too, want to close my eyes and have faith. Then Chuck calls me and jolts me awake. "*Look*,“ he commands. ”Can’t you see?" What he is seeing is so dark, none of us can even imagine it.

Chuck Ortleb is like the little boy in Goethe’s story “Erlking” who is being carried home by his father at night and is seized by a vision that terrifies him. “Father,” the son implores, “don’t you see the Erlking? With his crown and tail?” “My son,” the father replies, “that is a streak of mist!” “Father, don’t you see, there in the gloomy darkness, the Erlking’s daughters?” “My son,” the father replites, “it’s the old willow trees glowing so grayly.” Finally the boy calls out, “Father, he’s got me in his grip.” The father never did see what the boy saw. But in Goethe’s vision, it was not a delirium--it *was* the Erlking. The story ends tragically: “He galloped home with all his might--in his arms the child was dead.”

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