Pedigree Activism

Famous daughters Rory Kennedy and Vanessa Vadim fight for needle exchange

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Rory Kennedy and Vanessa Vadim are not happy. They hate talking to the press. They don't want to discuss their famous parents. They don't want to talk about their personal lives. They're activists. They want to discuss issues. But to advance issues, you need to use the media. It's a dilemma.

"It's weird," Vadim squirms. "All my life I have avoided publicity like the plague. I've deliberately walked behind cameras."

Kennedy, asked a personal question, pleads, "Can't we just talk about the issues?"

Sure, that's fine. Although the irony is that, of course, it's their quasi-celebrity status -- Rory is the youngest child of Robert and Ethel Kennedy; Vanessa, director Roger Vadim's and Jane Fonda's eldest child -- that gives them easy access to the media attention they now seek for their issues. So they grit their teeth and settle down at Coffee Shop in New York City's Union Square, miserable, but prepared to answer questions. At least they get lunch.

Kennedy and Vadim, former Brown University classmates, are videomakers and co-founders of MayDay Media. Their plan is to make short videos to "fight racism, sexism, classism and homophobia," and their first subject is AIDS prevention by needle exchange.

Why needle exchange for their first activist video?

"It brought together a whole range of issues I care about," explains Kennedy. "Women's health issues in particular. I majored in women's studies in college. And I'd just finished working on a three-part documentary, *Women of Substance*, about women and drug use. It became clear to me that needle exchange *works*. I'm interested in what works."

Their video, *Fire in Our House*, tells the story. Almost three-quarters of all women and children with HIV can trace their exposure back to infected needles. Half the injection-drug users in New York City are thought to be HIV positive. The majority of all new HIV cases are related to needle use.

"The facts are so clear," says Kennedy. "Here's something that could so easily save lives." *Fire in Our House* shows how. It visits street exchange sites all over the country. It introduces us to clients

and providers. Joyce Rivera-Beckman, who runs the St. Ann's Corner of Harm Reduction in the Bronx describes one of her clients, Hakim. "Hakim is a member of the community. And one of the things Hakim does in his life is shoot up. But Hakim is also a father and a productive, valued citizen. If Hakim uses infected needles, it will affect his partner, and his family and his friends."

Fire in Our House is not a neutral piece. It's a short, opinionated video designed to make a concrete difference. With the documentary Kennedy and Vadim demonstrate a mastery of techniques picked-up from some unlikely sources.

The radical far-right has proven adept at mobilizing without the aid of mainstream media. The Christian Coalition is not making boring, one-shot documentaries for PBS. They and others are making short propaganda videos, such as *The Gay Agenda*, and passing them out in church parking lots, showing them in homes to small groups of neighbors or sending them to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and every member of Congress.

Fire in Our House has been conceived and distributed in the same guerrilla manner. It lists crucial organizations and publications. It urges viewers to volunteer at exchange sites. It comes with a resource guide that tells viewers exactly which legislators to lobby and how to do it. Kennedy and Vadim have already held a screening and discussion for about 150 members of Congress and their staffs. When we talked they were finalizing plans for a similar screening in Sacramento for California legislators (sponsored by Vadim's stepfather, California assemblyman Tom Hayden). They want laws forbidding needle exchange reversed and they want the federal government to fund needle exchange as HIV prevention. They want drug treatment made universally and immediately available.

"Grassroots communities are asking for this kind of tool," says Kennedy. "I'm in this as an activist, not a journalist."

For Vadim it couldn't be any other way. "Activism has always been my way of life. It's what I breathed, ate and knew." Raised in the California farmworkers' struggle, she can remember being taken to a sit-in at Alcatraz when she was about one and a half. "I've been involved in anti-nuclear work and the anti-apartheid movement. I'm interested in environmental racism. And for the last seven years or so I've been doing queer liberation and AIDS activism."

And, like Kennedy, she's only 26. But these are no vacant, apathetic slackers.

"You know, I don't get this whole Generation X thing," says Vadim. "I see all these people my age doing incredible work -- human rights, legal defense, whatever. Of course, I come from a radical atmosphere, but we see people *everywhere* doing good work."

They both looked relieved when the questions ended.

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