

Rough Cuts

Two positive young women create a moving picture

September 1, 1998 By Kevin O'Leary

From our first conversation, Rebecca decided she didn't like me," says Jennifer Jako, 25. "I finally said, 'Listen, we're the only two women with HIV in Portland. We have to be friends.'"

It turned out that Rebecca Guberman, 26, had something else in common with Jako: An art school background and a desire to document the lives of other positive youth. What began as a reluctant friendship evolved into a deep collaboration, and the pair have created a video (with the working title of Blood Lines) comprised of interviews with over 70 youths with HIV. Now it has won the support of filmmaker Gus Van Sant (Good Will Hunting) and LA ad whizzes Wieden & Kennedy (of the soft spots with the hard sells for Microsoft, Nike and Coke).

The project hatched in 1995 with an instruction manual for a video camera. "We had this idea," Guberman says, "that while everyone was in DC for the first National Association of Positive Youth Conference, we could get all these interviews." In preparation, Jako and Guberman raced around, trying to drum up money for what they envisioned as a peer portrait of youth with HIV. There was just one glitch. The funds for the video camera only came in at the last minute, leaving the pair to figure out how to use it the night before shooting.

But the duo made it happen. "We just talked with people on camera," Jako says. "They trusted us with their stories because we were positive." Guberman agrees: "They knew we were doing this from our hearts and not from an exploitive standpoint."

And then the real work began. "We worked our asses off for a year and a half to get funding," Guberman says. But she cites a lack of knowledge about writing winning grant proposals as a major stumbling block.

With limited funds, they continued traveling across the country to do further interviews. As they become more technologically adept, they invested in digital video. Things were coming together.

"Then I went nuts for a little while," Guberman says quietly. Working on a video seven days a week proved to be a recipe for burnout. She took a short hiatus, and now says, "I didn't estimate the intensity of talking about illness every day while dealing with my own."

Judith Rizzio, a Portland AIDS hospice volunteer, stepped in to keep the project afloat. When Guberman felt well enough to return, Rizzio helped the women organize a committee to keep the project afloat. One person at the meeting happened to work for Wieden & Kennedy and suggested that the pair seek help from the LA big guns.

Enter Bedonna Smith, a producer for the agency's entertainment division. "We felt it was a moving project," she says of the raw footage brought to her door. "We would love the film to be on HBO or MTV." Since that first day, the ad reps have contributed heavily to the editing and postproduction of the film.

"We've learned so much from them," Guberman says. Jako adds: "So many documentaries about young people with AIDS look like infomercials. We wanted better."

The project caught the eye of Van Sant, who agreed to give his support after seeing the rough cut. He even shot press photos of the pair.

As the film nears its fall completion, Guberman, whose photography has been profiled in *Rolling Stone* (June 1997), is looking ahead. "I'm now represented by Savage Fine Arts, a Portland-based firm," she says. "I've renovated my studio and I'm ready to work."

Jako is also contemplating life post-film. "I could be in debt over some crazy car," she says. "Instead, I'm in debt over something that is very precious. But no, it's definitely not what I expected to do with my art school education."

A Matter of Trust

Amount pledged to charities in the name of Princess Diana as of the first anniversary of her death: \$21.7 million

Shallow Pool

Stargazers recently paid \$250 for VIP tix to APLA's celebrity pool tourney but had to make do with Lou Diamond Phillips and Brian Austin Green. At least there was an open bar!

Word of Mouth

"Monica" is the contact gal for Aid for AIDS's November "Blow Out!" benefit at LA's House of Blues. The belle with the biggest hair wins. Right, Bubba?