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Celebrity participation in fundraising should not equal unbridled indulgence of ego

February 1, 1997 By Sean Strub

The excerpt from Michael Anketell's *Tarnished Sequins* and Rodger McFarlane's introductory essay, "Stars, Studs & Events" (November 1996), which highlighted the unsavory truth behind AIDS Project Los Angeles' 1993 Friends of Fashion event honoring Calvin Klein, generated more response than any other article ever published in *POZ*.

One unfavorable response that gave us pause was from entertainment mogul David Geffen. Geffen's primary concern was not about the facts presented in the excerpt, nor about how he was portrayed. He was troubled by the possibility that exposés of this type will discourage celebrities from contributing their time and talent to AIDS benefits. He felt that, by publishing Anketell's excerpt, we imperil the success of future AIDS benefits.

Geffen, who is both a major donor and responsible for the participation of many celebrities in AIDS benefits, knows his Hollywood. And, for some celebrities, he is certainly correct.

But to the many, many celebrities who have repeatedly contributed selflessly of their time, talent and money, Geffen's perspective is an unintended insult. In the experience of those of us at *POZ*, most celebrities check their egos and self-interest at the door when they get involved in AIDS.

Celebrity participation should not equal unbridled indulgence of ego. Celebrity participation is not usually -- and should not ever be -- a strategy for advancing the financial self-interest of the celebrity. We are better off without those whose interests pervert the purpose of the event, or require what the Calvin Klein organization demanded for its involvement.

In the fashion and style industries, image is everything; it is the prime asset. Of course it should be a consideration in deciding how to produce an event maximizing celebrity participation; the question raised by Anketell's experience is about the appropriate boundaries.

To what extent are these benefits designed to advance an image rather than to fight AIDS? To what extent do we sacrifice integrity to the interests of those being "honored"?

Charitable fundraising that cannot stand the light of day needs to be examined. Virtually all types of fundraising are costly. Rather than cloak these activities in secrecy, the better approach is one of openness and accountability, using the reaction of the giving public as an important guide to

acceptable parameters.

Sadly, a once-valuable relationship between AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA) and Anketell, a former APLA volunteer, board member and consultant, has deteriorated to the point where APLA is making claims of financial misconduct against Anketell, prompting him to threaten suit for slander.

But ultimately, people with HIV will benefit from this discussion. Anketell’s honesty puts event producers, celebrities and AIDS organizations on notice that there are limits. Celebrities who exploit AIDS organizations and people with HIV for their own self-interest risk exposure and condemnation.

The light of public scrutiny may not purify the soul, but it is a powerful disinfectant.

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