S.O.S.—April 1999

April 1, 1999 By Sean Strub

Shortly after the packed, contentious community forum on barebacking that *POZ* cosponsored with GMHC and New York City's Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in January, my partner, Xavier, told me for the first time, quite bluntly, that he very much wanted to remain HIV negative, even though he fantasizes about having unprotected sex. It was the most honest discussion about sex and HIV that we, in our six years together, have had.

Certainly, Xavier's intense wish to stay negative is not surprising. He has witnessed firsthand the epidemic's devastation, losing loved ones and living for years with fear for my health as he cared for and cleaned up after me. To him, there is nothing theoretical about the pain and agony of AIDS.

But hearing him distinguish so frankly and clearly his intention to stay uninfected from his desire to bareback was a revelation to me. I had always thought *I* was more concerned about keeping Xavier negative than *he* was. Now I understand how highly he values being uninfected, and this has strengthened my desire to protect him. I can't be certain that we will never "slip" in the future, but I'm sure that today we have a stronger common goal in protecting each other than before.

Much of our safe-sex risk analysis had taken place in the throes of passion. We usually talked about sex in bed, spent from sweaty lovemaking, driven more by a search for postcoital affirmation than a heart-to-heart about transmission danger.

Talking about it this time over pizza in a restaurant was strange. We were stripped of the familiar paralyzing concern over what the other wanted, free from the desire to please our partner in the immediacy of desire. And we were left to express, with true nakedness, how we actually calculate the risks of specific sex acts.

Should we have had that cards-on-the-table conversation when we first met? Sure. What took us so long? The same fears that keep many others from having this discussion. What got us talking? The tempest of opinions and emotions swirling around *POZ*'s February "Boys Who Bareback" issue.

It's evident by now that *POZ* provoked many people with our coverage of barebacking. Certainly our decision not to downplay the appeal of this forbidden sex was a risky one (critics said we were "marketing" or "glamorizing" it). Why a sexy cover shot and brazen cover lines? Because we believe that acknowledging the power of unprotected sex is the first step to understanding it. The timing of the CDC's headline-making announcement—it took place just a week after the

forum—that the proportion of gay and bisexual men in San Francisco reporting unprotected anal sex increased by almost 30 percent from 1994 to 1997 only confirmed for us that seizing this issue head-on was the right thing to do.

Agree or disagree with February cover subject Tony Valenzuela's decision to have unprotected anal sex, but understand that he represents one specific position on the pleasure/danger spectrum that everyone negotiates every day. And anyone who has *ever* had sex without a condom has a place in the dialogue that *POZ* has helped to initiate. It is a matter of personal choice exactly where you and your partner draw the line at acceptable risk. But ever since that point in the epidemic when oral sex without a condom was made taboo, most gay men have understood that risk taking is more complicated than safe-sex messages have allowed.

Acquiring HIV is awful, and transmitting it may be even worse. On this we all agree. But to reduce the question our community must answer—"Why are so many gay men having so much unprotected sex?"—to two accusations—"How could you be so stupid as to get infected?" and "How could you ever infect another person?"—is to engage in a too-easy blaming that short-circuits the debate.

Long ago, out of fear, we crammed gay male sexuality into a neat and tidy box: "Always use a condom." To stray outside the box in thought or action was to risk censure or worse. But today, many gay men, especially younger ones, while still fearing AIDS, are nonetheless willing to wander outside of that box. They've learned that some of us have devised codes of conduct that are highly effective at preventing transmission of HIV and that others callously disregard that risk. And they've found community among those who have ventured beyond that box built in the '80s by a crisis mentality. After so long, it's only natural that the way we live, breathe and have sex in the epidemic has taken dramatic new shape.

POZ's coverage of barebacking has sparked intense—and sometimes personally painful—criticism, as well as reflection and spirited debate in our office. They also prompted Xavier and me to reach a new level of honesty, commitment and caring for each other. I can only hope the same is true for you.

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