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French attitude toward AIDS is truly offensive

May 12, 1995 By Sean Strub

For half a century, France has sought to cleanse the part of its past that collaborated with the Nazis and denied the death camps. In AIDS as well, France now has a past, as they were the last major Western nation to screen their blood supply for HIV. Tens of thousands were exposed because of greed and blind nationalism. And the campaign to cleanse that past is already underway. The most recent salvo was a self-righteous French court's decision to fine Benetton $32,000 because the court found Benetton's advertising campaign offensive.

What was offensive about it?

The ad dared to show a vital, robust man pictured with a tattoo that said "HIV positive." The court said it upset people. No kidding. The court said it "evoked Nazi barbarity." No kidding. That's the point.

Visible expressions of one's HIV status—namely, tattoos—are increasingly used as an empowerment tool (see *POZ* Nos. 2 and 3) to erase the shame and stigma so many associate with AIDS. That's the same reason why I and so many other people with AIDS have gone public with our status. Many Holocaust survivors wear death camp numeric tattoos for the rest of their lives, preventing the world from forgetting the genocide. Similarly, many people have had their HIV status written on their skin to fight society's denial of AIDS and to make sure the world will never forget the genocide we are in the midst of today.

Peter Fressola, Benetton's spokesperson, says, "If these ads call to mind the brutality of Nazism, so be it. It's not an inappropriate interpretation of the image, considering that at various right wingers have advocated Nazi-like tactics to deal with AIDS."

Benetton's campaign is part of their ongoing effort to highlight critical social issues. It puts AIDS directly in people's faces. And it makes some of them, especially in France, apparently uncomfortable.

The French court's decision about its national discomfort, which is quite obviously spelled d-e-n-i-a-l. France's AIDS *denial* is far ore reflective of Nazi-era attitudes than Benetton's awareness-building advertising campaign. Denial of the scope of the problem. Denial of the condoms to young

people. Denial of honest education. Denial of information tools—such as treatment education, home access HIV testing and alternative therapies—which can give people the information they need to survive.

Fortunately, Benetton intends to appeal the judgment. History will no doubt record the French court's retrograde decision as reflective of precisely why Benetton's campaign is so revolutionary, so vital and so courageous.

My message to France: You've got AIDS and censoring a billboard isn't going to make it go away.

Enjoy *POZ* but be careful not to talk about AIDS. In France (and elsewhere) they're liable to call you offensive.

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