# She’s Going to Live!

ER shows that AIDS on TV doesn’t always equal death

May 1, 1997 By Erik Meers

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A decade ago, it seemed gratuitous to complain that AIDS plotlines onscreen were virtually interchangeable: *Man (usually gay) has anonymous sex. Man gets AIDS. Man dies an excrutiating death.* In risk-adverse Hollywood circa 1985, not many producers had the guts to go against the status quo. So what little there was was indeed groundbreaking. That year, Mark Harmon’s character on *St. Elsewhere* died just a few episodes after he was diagnosed. And *An Early Frost* became one of the first TV movies to tackle AIDS. It wasn’t until 1993 that *Philadelphia* became the first Hollywood movie to do the same. Ever more screenplays touch on AIDS, but they largely follow the tired formula set out by these first few shows.

This grim narrative familiarity is less appropriate now than ever before. While you can read breathless accounts of so-called miracle-drug breakthroughs in *Newsweek* and *The New York Times,* you’d be hard-pressed to find such images on either big or small screens.

It’s not surprising that *ER,* commended before in this column for its right-on coverage, has been at the forefront of dramatizing the new realities of life with HIV. This season, several episodes of *ER* were devoted to the story of physician-assistant Jeanie Boulet (Gloria Reuben), who finds out she’s positive after her estranged husband lands in the emergency room where she works.

Now activists are lining up to praise *ER.* “It’s a very realistic plotline. The Jeanie Boulet character didn’t want to tell anyone, and then rumors started flying and the only way she could stop them was to disclose. That’s a very real scenario,” says Marla Hassner, an attorney who does workplace counseling for Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC). “This show will be helpful. Here’s this young, attractive woman who is a very compelling character that people have been following. This will humanize it.” Hassner’s one gripe is over a scene in which a couple of doctors are given a stack of law books and asked to devise an HIV policy. “That’s like having two surgeons coming to me as a lawyer to ask which surgical technique to use. That was preposterous!”

The show’s producers promise that Boulet’s in it for the long haul. “It was of interest to us to know what it’s like when a health care worker has the disease, and how it does and does not change the nature of the job,” *ER* executive producer Lydia Woodward told *USA Today.* “We will pursue that story, as opposed to pursuing a story of someone dying with AIDS. It’s not our intention to watch Jeanie die.”

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