Some Like It Hot

Meet the Marilyn Monroe of AIDS awareness

June 1, 1998 By Helen Eisenbach

The protesters were gathering outside the building on the University of Pittsburgh campus. The woman they'd come together to denounce invited them inside to join the discussion, but not one person picketing would acknowledge the sweet-faced, slender blond who didn't seem ashamed of anything -- not her former livelihood or her present calling. "They were protesting the fact that a *Playboy* playmate was talking about AIDS," Rebekka Armstrong says. "They said, 'Would you want to get information on lung cancer from somebody in the tobacco industry?'"

There was a time when the softly outspoken, delicate but tenacious 31-year-old might even have agreed with them. "If you had told me back in '89, when I was diagnosed, that one day I would be shouting off the rooftops, 'I have AIDS and I want you to listen,'" says Armstrong, her voice girlish, "I would have said, 'You're high.'"

Were you a wild girl?

No. When I think of wild women, I think of women that I would date for one night.

Where are they now?

Probably at the same strip clubs I used to pick them up at. I was a slut, girl! I used to go to strip clubs and try to take one home.

Just one?

One a night.

What was it about strippers that drew you to them?

Easy prey.

The first time I meet the *Playboy* bunny, she is underdressed.

Rebekka Armstrong comes out of the hotel elevator wearing an oversize sweater and knit cap: No coat. She might be a wholesome teenager going out for ice cream, except that it's far too cold a New York night for ice cream, and she's no little girl. She's excited to be in Manhattan, happy to walk the many blocks to a shiny, overpriced restaurant. She's just flown in from Massachusetts,

where she was one of the only passengers on the small aircraft. Making conversation, I ask if it scares her (as it terrifies me) to fly in tiny planes.

“When you have AIDS, you’re not afraid of anything,” she says.

Over a meal as elegantly appointed as our surroundings, the playmate-next-door talks cheerfully about bisexuality and brain infections and AIDS without a thought to the possible shock or disapproval of anyone who might be listening in. The picture of an all-American ingenue, she seems without vanity or ego, incapable of thinking like a victim; she is the first to admit her fears or failings, to put a distinctly human spin on attempts to make her look noble. “Well, I’ve been lucky, because...” she starts many a sentence. If the ability to find something positive in any twist in the road makes someone lucky, Rebekka Armstrong is blessed.

You’d never know to look at her how many different lives Armstrong has lived. “She grew up in the middle of the Mojave desert, without any amenities,” says *Playboy* communications director Bill Farely, “so maybe that steeled her to be tough later on.” Until the age of 16, she was a tomboy prodigy of sorts at desert racing, bent on being a professional motocross racer. Thanks to a less-than-ideal family life -- her parents seemed more interested in indulging their own addictions to violence and alcohol than in providing a nurturing home for their two children -- Armstrong quit racing, dropped out of school and moved out on her own. “It wasn’t like I was this mature girl who had her own place and was being responsible,” she says. “You look so grown up when you have your own pad at sixteen, you know?”

Sixteen was also the age she first “actually said it out loud”: She wanted to pose for the pages of *Playboy*. “I don’t know where it came from,” Armstrong says. Her grandfather had a collection she would secretly look at. "There was a wooden hamper and if you pulled it out, there was a little wooden door, and in that little closet were *Playboy*s,“ says Armstrong, who declared her modeling aspirations to her mother and boyfriend while she was still in high school. Asked if either tried to talk her out of it, or perhaps found her determination to bare all shocking, Armstrong seems puzzled. ”They weren’t shocked at all," she says.

Having put her dream into words, she put it out of mind. Then, “the day of my eighteenth birthday, sometime after waking up and before dinner,” Armstrong realized she was old enough to make her fantasy real. Not that she was brazen. “Of course I was shy and a little embarrassed, like anybody is anytime you take your clothes off for the first time in front of somebody,” she says. Yet sexual inhibition was one of the family values she hadn’t learned, and *Playboy* seemed magical to her.

“The girls up on pedestals” were a group Armstrong yearned to join in more ways than one. The angelic beauty who can still remember the name of the second-grade teacher she had a crush on (“Mrs. Duffy. Are you kidding?”) was “very, very young” when she realized she liked girls as well as boys, though she says, “I didn’t realize that’s what it was I was liking.”

She was equally innocent about what her dream job would entail. “I remember thinking, ’You take a bunch of really beautiful pictures and you’re in a magazine and you’re a star and you’re beautiful.’” A family friend with a connection to the magazine arranged an introduction. At the

Playboy Mansion, “testing for my shoot,” she first met Hugh Hefner. “I don’t even know if I got past the fear,” she says of her first impression of the legendary *Playboy* founder. “I was so nervous -- you know: This is the man in charge, this is who I have to impress.” After passing the first hurdle, she would get up at the crack of dawn for the next eight months for 4 am shoots that captured “the early morning apricot light” on the roof of the *Playboy* building. When she asked why so many pictures had yet to yield a winning spread, Armstrong was told, “The pubic hair on the left side wasn’t fluffed as much as on the right.”

Properly fluffed, Armstrong eventually joined the pantheon as Miss September 1986, in a spread that cast her as a tomboy-turned-femme that (in quintessential *Playboy* fashion) conveyed little of Armstrong’s actual personality, instead capturing an almost generic all-American blonde wholesomeness. “When I look back on them now, I think they’re fabulous,” she says. “I recognize that girl.” The exposure led to the jobs that would make up her livelihood: Modeling and playing “stereotypical blond bimbos” in softcore "*Playboy* comedies.“ Though she found pretending for the camera fun, in her personal life the burden of being a sex symbol sometimes weighed on her. ”I was always trying to outdo,“ she says. ”I was a *Playboy* playmate, so automatically that meant I performed well in bed. Then there were the ones that, since I was a playmate, *they* really had to perform.“ Armstrong grins. ”After a while, I didn’t even tell anybody [about *Playboy*] until after I hooked them."

“Am I just ranting?” Armstrong asks the following afternoon, after delivering perhaps three sentences on the current state of medical affairs. She fears a lot of people think AIDS “is something that is almost gone,” thanks to myopic media coverage of new treatments. Sunlight streams through the window of the coffee shop and across her tiny frame as she worries that people will put themselves more at risk: “Can’t I just take those pills that Magic Johnson has?” she’s had kids ask. “Where’s the government and where’s the media? A lot of people can’t tolerate these meds, and some people become immune to them,” Armstrong says. “The media will say two sentences [about protease inhibitors or morning-after pills], and that’s all the education households will get.”

It’s typical that she’s more concerned about strangers’ than her own trials, past and future. About the fact that she’s probably going to have to have her spleen removed in a few days due to trouble with her platelets, she simply says, “You know when they start taking parts out of you, that’s not good.”

These days, Armstrong discusses making a “comedy routine” about her initial diagnosis in 1989, but it took years for her to see any irony in the situation. While breaking up with a boyfriend who had been having a few too many *ménages à trois* (“People would call up and ask for him,” she says cheerfully when I ask how she found out), Armstrong felt so out of sorts she decided to get a complete physical. “I thought I was pregnant,” she says, citing her missed periods, fatigue and bruising. Her ex-boyfriend had been tested several times for HIV and was surprised Armstrong hadn’t. “To be cool, I said, ’Oh, and let me have one of those HIV tests, too.’ I knew I didn’t have AIDS.” Calling for her results, she couldn’t get an answer from her doctor. "She kept saying, ’You have to come in right *now*.’“ Finally, the doctor told Armstrong she was positive. ”I said, ’Well, how

many months along am I?'" thinking this was confirmation of her pregnancy.

When she told her mother, the conversation was equally surreal. “Of course you are,” her mother said on hearing her daughter say she was positive. “You’ve always been a positive person.”

Though five years ago she went public “just in time to develop full-blown AIDS,” she’s doing well on her current combo of Viracept and Combivir (AZT and 3TC in one pill), with a “nonexistent” viral load and CD4-cell count pushing 1,000. She grows heated on the difference between being HIV positive and having AIDS. “I don’t think that’s a line that should ever be crossed, because people lose hope big-time. Even though I knew that was going to happen someday, when I was told, I was devastated,” she says.

It’s hard to imagine her losing hope, though the years that followed that harrowing phone call were fairly grim. Armstrong increased her reliance on speed, her drug of choice on and off for 13 years. “I was dying anyway, so I might as well do these drugs. And you know, I may be dead tomorrow, so I might just as well stay up tonight,” she says, echoing her post-diagnosis despair. For the first time, she fought with her “hero” -- the little brother who’d proudly sold autographed copies of her *Playboy* centerfold to his schoolmates -- after he moved into her Beverly Hills penthouse to help take care of her. “Naturally when your little brother hides your dope, you get pissed,” Armstrong says.

Chiefly, she was terrified of people finding out that she had HIV, chalking up leaks of her status to a rejected boyfriend’s overzealous revenge. (The first person this ex told was his friend Axl Rose, the notorious Guns ’n’ Roses singer, inexplicably heightening her fear of exposure.) Her paranoia even extended to medical care. After flying to Texas with a girlfriend -- “to buy boots,” she says with an impish twinkle -- Armstrong’s pancreas began to rupture on a dance floor, but she begged her lover not to tell the emergency room doctors she was positive. She didn’t even want to call her doctor back home, lest he tell the people treating her.

Meanwhile, her failing health caused her to miss jobs, and soon the offers stopped coming, thanks to a bad reputation that no one knew the real reason for. Sleeping on friends’ couches, Armstrong never stayed anywhere long enough to give away that she was sick and homeless, making sure to call her family periodically so they wouldn’t get suspicious. At last she realized that in order to take charge of her future, she would have to come out to her employers.

In recent decades, a time-honored tension between sexism and sexual activism has cohabited almost schizophrenically inside *Playboy*’s glossy pages, its libertine mission only partly at odds with the fact that a good portion of its staff (and perhaps even its readership) has traditionally been feminist and gay. Indeed, *Playboy*, a bastion of heterosexual convention, has been at the forefront of the epidemic’s coverage since it was known as Gay-Related Immune Deficiency syndrome. Today, the magazine’s clear-eyed, nonjudgmental perspective on the epidemic continues. And recently, *Playboy* Enterprises Inc.’s chairman and chief executive officer, Hugh’s daughter Christie Hefner, raised $25 million to build Chicago’s CORE Center, which, upon its completion this fall, will be the first free-standing, specialized outpatient facility for PWAs in the

Midwest. “We’re corporate warriors, freedom fighters,” says *Playboy* promotions VP Cindy Rakowitz, a self-proclaimed “Jewish woman from New York with a big mouth,” who believes censorship, not sexuality, is the enemy. "*Playboy*’s about debate, not about forcing smut on you," she says.

It turned out some of Armstrong’s fears were justified -- the first person she told at *Playboy* reacted with brutal callousness, making her provide medical documents to prove she wasn’t lying -- but for the most part, *Playboy* rallied around her. “Christie wrote me a really beautiful letter saying she backed me and would support me with whatever I was doing,” says Armstrong. “Hef came over to me at the Mansion when I was there for Easter and said that everyone was praying for me.”

Today, *Playboy* funds some of her educational travels (including last year’s *POZ* Expos in New York City and Chicago), where Armstrong bares herself in quite a different way, speaking to young people at schools all over the country. “I was probably infected at the age of sixteen,” Armstrong says. “I started thinking about the first time you’re in love, and how you don’t think. You just want to give yourself. I thought, ’I’ve got to go talk about that.’ There’s a chance that it doesn’t matter anyway, because they’re going to do what they’re going to do, but at least give them some information that might help save their lives.”

“Rebekka’s the perfect heroine,” says Rakowitz, who met Armstrong three years ago at an AIDS Project Los Angeles/Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS fundraiser. “She’s the walking example, unfortunately for her, of how important safe sex is no matter what your sexual preference. The more press that gets out there about the Rebekkas of the world, the more the message will reach people that women have to be careful and men have to be held accountable.” Armstrong puts it more simply: “When I speak to these kids, I’m the first time they’ve ever knowingly been in the room with somebody that has AIDS.” A man who interviewed Armstrong last year may have been afraid to shake her hand, but the kids line up for hugs after she speaks.

Armstrong’s ex-girlfriend accompanied her early on. “The students couldn’t get over the fact that I was there with a woman that I shared the same bed with,” she says. "You would hear them whispering. They’d made up their minds that this was some lesbian problem, and since they weren’t lesbians, this had nothing to do with them. I guess a lot of people do that. ’I’m not an IV drug-user’ or ’It’s a fag disease.’ *Hello?*"

These days she’s living “in a big house with a big mortgage” and a pack of guys -- including Joey Shea, the film editor/painter she met while at a strip club with a girlfriend with whom she was fighting. Shea and Armstrong started out as friends but, to her surprise, the relationship changed shortly before he moved back to his family home in Groton.

Not having told him about her past or her status, Armstrong found herself increasingly agonized about the moment of truth. “There’s something I have to tell you,” she finally told him. But before she could, he said, “I know.” Recalls Armstrong, "I said, ’No, there’s something I *really* have to tell you,’ and he said, ’I *know*.’“ It turned out that Shea had seen an article in Armstrong’s purse --

”She’d asked me to get her some cigarettes," he says -- an *Advocate* cover story that declared Armstrong an “HIV Positive Lesbian Centerfold.” Shea wasn’t fazed. “I just kind of sat down on the bed to think about if it bothered me or not,” he says. “It’s not like I was devastated. I’m a pretty educated guy, and I knew that I couldn’t catch it from her like a cold. It just didn’t matter.”

Nor did Armstrong’s bisexuality: When an ex-girlfriend told Shea that Armstrong was confused about her sexuality, Shea responded, “No, honey, she’s not confused, she’s just greedy,” recognizing his wife’s boundless appetite for life. “I’m pretty lucky,” says Shea. “Not very many people get to find that person who you can feel comfortable being with for the rest of your life.”

A lot has changed since Armstrong went to see *Longtime Companion* by herself and sat isolated from any other people “because it was so devastating and I couldn’t let anybody know that it was affecting me.” Today, she’s anxious to reach as many people as she can, particularly young people and minority women “as long as my health allows and there’s a demand.” In addition to public speaking, Armstrong is soliciting writers for her life story. She’s increasingly eager to get made a movie version that *Risky Business* and *Forrest Gump* producer Steve Tisch optioned three years ago. “At first I thought, ’Wow, they’re going to do a movie about me?’” Armstrong says, recalling when director Antonia Bird (*Priest*) met with a pre-*Ellen* Laura Dern, not even knowing Dern was Armstrong’s first choice. “Now I’m like, ’Come on, let’s do this already!’”

It would seem an irresistible story -- several, in fact: Uniquely American tale of rags to riches and tragedy to triumph, distinctly contemporary romantic comedy, combo sex romp/spiritual heartwarmer, liberation parable with a bold yet gentle, humble yet freely desirous heroine. “Whether it’s TV or film, whether it’s a million or ten million dollars, I think it’s something that should be out there,” she says of her story. “If it’s on TV, some girl that’s sitting there who’s infected with AIDS...” Armstrong pauses for a heartbeat. “I don’t want her to be infected, but I don’t want her to be alone, either.”

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