Streethearts

The Thelma and Louise of AIDS outreach

June 1, 1999 By Gabi Horn

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*After two years of pounding the pavement in Camden, New Jersey, in search of HIV positive prostitutes and drug addicts, two outreach workers, **Sadia Sanchez**, 33, and **Angela Cocco**, 43, have forged a relationship with some of the most at-risk populations east of the Delaware. The duo's uncommon access to crack houses and brothels in one of the Garden State's poorest cities recently caught the media's eye.* POZ *peeked behind the scenes of this two-woman tour de force.*

You two depend on each other in dangerous situations. Have you always gotten along so well?

Sadia: No. It was real hard at first. We had different ways of thinking and we'd irritate each other.
Angela: I was sheltered growing up, and I wasn't as careful as I could have been. I trust everyone.
Sadia: And I trust no one. I'm Spanish—
Angela: And I'm Caucasian. We're definitely from opposite sides of the spectrum. But we complement each other: If one of us can't reach someone, the other usually can.

How did you reconcile your differences?

Angela: We went to a marriage counselor—our supervisor.

The Associated Press called you the Condom Ladies.

Angela: It's weird. Our real job is linking HIV positive people with services in the Southern New Jersey area.
Sadia: And we do a good job, too. We go into crack houses and abandominiums—

Abandominiums?

Angela: Abandoned buildings. People don't call their homes broken-down shacks, they call them abandominiums. And that's the ticket to our success, really—we refer to people's homes the same way they do. We respect.

Are you well received?

Angela: Now we are. In the beginning people thought we were undercover cops or from Child Protection Services.

What keeps you going when people turn their backs?

Sadia: Realizing that we'll see them again, that maybe next time they'll be more accepting.
Angela: We're like the Energizer bunnies: We just keep going.

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