Taxi-cum-Pro

King of New York City's streets, Chris Lynn wheels, deals and scene-steals

January 1, 1997 By Mark J. Huisman

"Hellohowareyoucomewithme." From the moment Christopher R. Lynn greets me in the waiting room of his lower Manhattan office, he hardly stops to draw breath. Crisply dressed in a pin-striped white shirt and bright gold-and-blue tie, Lynn storms into the office of Brice Peyre, his bespectacled, bearded assistant, who is sitting at his desk thumbing through the morning tabloids, phone in one hand, iced coffee in the other.

"Brice, this reporter's been waiting out there-for how long?" Lynn nods at me. "And you're sitting here reading the paper? Drinking iced coffee?"

"I'm trying to deal with this bridge thing," Peyre says flatly. Hours earlier, the American Automobile Association had released a report blasting New York City's bridges as the nation's worst.

Lynn won't have it. "They're wrong. What do they know?" he says. And again he's off, a pin-striped blur down the hall. "Come with me. I'll educate you."

A hundred paces later, Lynn settles behind an expansive desk in the corner office he occupies as New York City's recently appointed Commissioner of Transportation, overseeing some 4,000 staffers and a $500 million budget. Last June, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a Republican, promoted Lynn, a Democrat, to the post from the Taxi and Limousine Commission, which he chaired for a year. Lynn's now-famous initiatives-the Taxi Rider's Bill of Rights posted in every cab, air-conditioning on demand and an enormously popular $30 flat fare from JFK Airport to Manhattan--earned him no small amount of admiration from New Yorkers. And being openly gay and HIV positive in the media-drunk metropolis has only heightened his public profile.

"I was practicing law at that time, trying cases," the 46-year-old Lynn recalls of his diagnosis in March 1992. But when his CD4 cells came back at 800, and his doctor said he didn't have t worry for about six years-"When you'll be down to about 200 CD4 cells and you'll have AIDS," the doctor told him-Lynn immediately sought different advice. His new (and current) physician, Dr. Barbara Starrett, started viral-load tests right away. "Few other doctors were doing that," Lynn says. He credits Starrett with easing some of his early apprehension about the almighty CD4 cell.

Ironically, Starrett’s prescience led Lynn to put his legal skills to work on his own behalf. Blue Cross-Blue Shield was not reimbursing him for the viral-load tests, at the time calling them experimental. Having spent about $2,500 of his own money, he sued Blue Cross in small-claims court and, armed with articles from *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, won. "The arbitrator took one look at these things and said, ’Well, if you’ve got one expert who can refute what the AMA *Journal* says, I’ll diallow the test.’" Blue Cross produced no such expert and finally agreed to pay.

Lynn crooks a finger at an office worker hanging pictures on the wall behind us. “Take this down to Brice,” Lynn says, handing the man a file full of color photocopies and charts. “Tell him it’ll give him a thumbnail sketch of where we are with the bridges.” Lynn turns back to me and grins: The day’s first crisis tidily dispatched.

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