The Accidental Advocate

Tom Viola makes sure Broadway cares

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When 22-year-old Tom Viola came to New York City in 1976 with his sights set on Broadway, he undoubtedly hoped his name would someday appear in lights. Although he's working successfully in the theater district, these days he's actually found his niche above the marquees, in the 13th-floor office of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS (BC/EFA), the theater world's largest AIDS fundraising organization.

"I didn't have any idea that this was going to become a career," he says from behind his neatly organized desk. It was from behind just such a desk that the organization first took off in the late '80s. As assistant to the late Colleen Dewhurst, then president of Actor's Equity, Viola was busy coordinating activities like bake sales and poster signings to raise money for theater-community members with AIDS, when producers independently formed a group called Broadway Cares, which organized more traditional big-ticket fundraising events. "Broadway Cares had the best name," Viola says, "but [Actor's Equity] really had grass-roots support and a lot of energy bubbling." The two groups started to work together, and by 1991 they had merged into a single entity.

BC/EFA is now a $6 million-a-year operation. But the heart of the group's activities remains theater community-based fundraising efforts like the Easter Bonnet Competition, which caps a six-week in-theater appeal that raised $1.3 million last spring. The competition features elaborate oversized hats and satiric numbers performed by Broadway and touring companies, and combines the rough-edged audacity of a hey-let's-put-on-a-show effort with Broadway know-how.

Tom Viola has the same combination of show-biz savvy and heartland manner. He originally hails from Pittsburgh and remains close with his family there. And though he groans about his age -- he's 42 -- his blue-gray eyes, easy smile and warmly resonant voice convey an impression of quiet energy and youthful vigor. In addition to his more-than-full-time job, Viola recently completed work on the manuscript of Colleen Dewhurst's autobiography, a collaboration that was about two-thirds complete at the time of her death in 1991.

In addition to his theater background, Viola brings to his work his personal experience as an HIV positive gay man. When he first learned he was HIV positive in February 1992, he was going through a difficult personal period: After four years of sobriety, he suffered a relapse into drug and alcohol addiction. Initially, he didn't talk about his HIV status in the BC/EFA office because he was

concentrating on “getting clean again.” By April of that year, he realized he couldn’t do it alone and checked into Hazelden, the well-known drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility in Minnesota. As he was finishing rehab, his office informed him that a New York tabloid had called to confirm he was in rehab and that he was HIV positive. Before you could say “12-step program,” the published item was coming in over the fax -- just one week before he was to go home.

“I was pretty shaken up,” he says. “I was primarily concerned for my parents, who knew I was in rehab, but not that I was HIV positive. I intended to talk to them when I got out, and I didn’t want them to find out that way.” Luckily, the tabloid item never made it to Pittsburgh, and Viola was able to tell them himself a few months later.

When he returned to work in May, everyone in his office, the AIDS community and the theater community knew about his status. “If whoever manipulated that leak thought it would take me down, it did the exact opposite,” Viola says.

“[I realized] if I was going to be standing up in front of audiences and talking about people living with AIDS, it would be intensely hypocritical for me not to say ’I,’” he says. “All of that -- the good and the bad of it -- has gotten me to what I am today. And frankly, I don’t know that I would change any bit of it. Where I am today is a pretty good place.”

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