The Doll Factory

July 1, 2000 By Kevin O'Leary

This month marks the one-year anniversary of Candice Moench and Kathy Gerus-Darbison's hitting upon a doll of an idea. Their Stitches Project, part of Michigan's Midwestern AIDS Prevention Project, invites women with HIV to use the blank canvas of a rag doll to create representations of their inner lives. Gerus-Darbison, who was diagnosed the day after her 28th birthday in 1985, gives POZ the details:

"It was Candice's idea to do a project just for HIV positive women that would be artistic but also therapeutic. We were talking and suddenly it was 'Ohmigod, we could have them make dolls,' and then 'They could write what they'd say if they could talk!' Within a half hour, we wrote up the brochure and made up the plan to distribute them. It was like, wham, bam...

"We bought 75 Bendi dolls—$3 each—and we mailed them out, with return postage, to women around the country living with HIV. We got some flak for not having 'dolls of color,' and we felt bad about not thinking about that, but we fixed it. We dyed some a shade darker, and now women have a choice.

"We've gotten 12 back. We're hoping for more, but women with HIV have a lot of things going on. They often don't take time for themselves, let alone this. And a lot say that they sit down with the doll, ready to work on it—and then they just get stuck. When it comes to what's inside of us, feeling like, you know, a vector of disease and all that other stuff—it's scary to put it out there. We feel a pressure to be perfect, and these dolls are about defying the roles that women—especially us—feel we have to live up to. Sometimes you think, 'Let me live my life."

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