The Heat Is On

A Miami cop relinquishes his right to remain silent

June 1, 1996 By Juan Carlos Perez

When asked to describe himself, officer Ambrose Sims says, “I’m a soft man who carries a big stick.” His boss, Detective Al Boza of the Miami Beach police department, says Sims is “a role model to the homosexual and African-American communities.” But Wyn Morris says he’s the man who put her life at risk on December 20, 1995, when a small amount of Sims’ HIV positive blood stained her silk blouse while the officer attempted to subdue her rage over the towing of her illegally parked Jaguar.

And another tabloid story is born.

Morris’s lawyer, Joel Hirschhorn -- well-known for defending drug lords in the 1980s -- went straight to the media, denouncing the 42-year-old police officer as a “moron” and a “walking time bomb.” But he wasn’t the only one to take his case to the tube. In fact, all of the players in this drama -- Morris, Sims and his attorney, Aubrey Rudd -- have made their appeals on the TV talk-show circuit.

But controversy, challenge and the limelight are elements Sims has become accustomed to since he came out as a gay man in a letter to the editor published in *The Miami Herald* in 1989, nine years after he joined the force. He went public with his sexual orientation because he felt “the unacceptable alternative was to live in a suffocating prison of cowardice, constantly afraid that I would not survive if someone discovered I was gay.” This attitude of honesty quickly turned Sims into the most visible gay man in blue on the Miami Beach beat. As local lesbian activist Cece Shantzek says, “I feel safe knowing he’s around.”

Two years ago, when Sims was diagnosed HIV positive, he again began the process of coming out to his colleagues on the force. He received a good deal of support and understanding. “I’m in good health,” he says, and instantly dismisses Hirschhorn’s assertion that Sims is “someone who belongs behind a desk.” As a matter of fact, Sims takes Morris’ attorney to task, calling him “a nut with the ethics of a cockroach.”

“The whole thing is ridiculous. Only two or three drops of blood spilled on her blouse,” he says of the cut he received while handcuffing Morris. “When the command staff asked me if they should inform her of my status I said, ’Sure.’” (Under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, he could have refused.) After being charged with the felonies of “battery” and “resisting arrest with violence,” Morris was told of Sims’ serostatus -- on the way to the women’s detention center. She

fainted.

At this point, the case has yet to be settled, and, by law, Morris must wait six months to file a municipality. If no settlement is reached and the case goes to trial, Sims says he'll make the best of it. "I can't let the stress affect my health." It is for this reason, Sims says with an impish grin, that he recently moved from the boisterous neighborhood of South Beach to the calm comfort of Carol City. "I couldn't stand the parking problem."

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