# The Most Dangerous AIDS Reporter

Her renegade coverage had the AIDS world screaming bloody murder. Now, writer Richard Berkowitz gets Celia Farber to answer a decade of charges—and level a few of her own.

April 1, 2000 By Richard Berkowitz, MD

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Celia Farber "penetrates the ostensible," probing and asking questions long after other big-name AIDS reporters file their stories and head home. She first made her mark in 1987 with her monthly Spin column, “Words from the Front.” Over the next decade, her sacred cow-skewering reportage became an AIDS must-read, with investigations into such controversies as whether HIV causes AIDS an whether AZT kills, ground-breaking coverage of long-term survival and a platform for even the most extreme HIV dissidents. Farber may have made enemies in high places, but pioneering PWA Michael Callen, in his will, called her “the best AIDS reporter in the country.”

And she has paid the price for her renegade style: a barrage of personal and professional attacks culminating in 1995 with a high-profile sexual-harassment lawsuit against Spin and its publisher, Bob Guccione, Jr., during which Farber testified as exhibit A, said by the prosecution to have earned her job because of her romantic involvement with Guccione rather than her journalistic skills. After a bruising battle, the jury found that there had been no sexual favoritism. Soon after, Guccione sold Spin, and “Words From the Front” was picked up by the online magazine Iron Minds. Farber, 34, lives in New York City with her husband and son. She continues to make waves in her renamed column, “Welcome to the Machine.”

POZ: You’re billed as the most controversial AIDS journalist around.

Farber: I don’t think of myself as controversial at all. I think what others perceive as controversial is that I’ve lent gravity to large questions that most mainstream AIDS reporters have felt comfortable ignoring entirely. The biggest of all being, “Does HIV cause AIDS?” I’ve never said that it does or it does not—I’m not really equipped to know. But when I look around and see legions of respectable scientists arguing that it does not, then I cannot see why I shouldn’t report it. It’s not only news—it’s great human drama. It’s Shakespearean! And I for one really want to know how it’s going to end, and what the moral is going to be.

It has driven me nearly bananas. It is my private hell, but also my great Sisyphean challenge. My Labyrinth...

How did you get started writing about the epidemic?

I was working nights at my father’s late-night* radio show, The Barry Farber Show, screening calls

from listeners in 1986, when he had a guest on, Michael May, who was convinced that AL 721 was the cure for AIDS. I became enthralled with this man and his story and began a yearlong research project into these egg lipids and access and all that. It was a crash course in AIDS politics. I had this burning sense of right and wrong, and this fear that people were being—not murdered exactly, but threatened. Not being kept alive.

I was also working as a research assistant at Spin, and I brought the story to Bob Guccione, Jr. Eventually he published the AL 721 article as the first installment of a monthly AIDS column.

Why a monthly AIDS column in a straight music magazine?

Bob said AIDS was the Vietnam of our generation.

You'd known Guccione for a long time.

Yeah. My father introduced us the first time when I was 9 years old, and he was 19. He was publishing a rock magazine called Poster, and he gave me a great poster of David Bowie.

How did you get drawn into the debate over whether HIV causes AIDS?

I read about [HIV naysayer] Dr. Peter Duesberg in *The New York Native* in 1987, and then I interviewed him.  My editor at *Spin* refused to even read it. So, I snuck the interview onto Bob's desk, which was really very cheeky. He went nuts. He called me that night and said, "This may be the most important interview I ever publish."

Bob believes in old-fashioned journalism values, in fighting evil through words.  The AIDS column nearly destroyed us before it was all over. But I still think it was worth it.

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