The Times, They Are a Changin’

February 1, 2000 By Andy Humm

The AIDS beat at The New York Times died quietly in October. Established in 1987 after intense lobbying by AIDS activists—and the departure of antigay Executive Editor Abe Rosenthal—the beat allowed a reporter to cover the epidemic full-time. Bruce Lambert, the first to land the gig, averaged a story a week for three years and called it “the most challenging thing I ever did or will do.” But the AIDS beat at the nation’s most important newspaper was buried without a whimper. No activists cried out, and few Times reporters were aware of its passing—one more sign of ebbing passions around the everlasting crisis.

John Landman, appointed Times Metro editor in September, said that the change was made because “as a general proposition, there are not beats devoted to diseases.” He said that, for a period of years, “AIDS was a rare exception. It was a terrifying, new disease with enormous impact on the cultural world, the gay community, health, hospitals.” Covering AIDS “was a full-time job.” But that was then. Lynda Richardson, the last reporter to fill the slot, was out sick much of last year and filed only irregularly.

“All the AIDS beat reporters are gone or doing it rarely,” said Larry Kramer, who crusaded for the Times to step up its AIDS coverage in the ’80s, carrying on a famously contentious correspondence with then– Executive Editor Max Frankel after he replaced Rosenthal in 1987. “No one gives a fuck about AIDS anymore.” The Times’ decision could help seal that fate.

Of course, Laurie Garrett still kicks up dust from her AIDS perch at Newsday, a New York–area tab, as do full-time AIDS reporters Michael Waldholz at The Wall Street Journal and Mark Schoofs at The Village Voice, which just published his 10-part series on the African epidemic. The San Francisco Chronicle, where the late Randy Shilts pioneered the AIDS beat, still has three reporters assigned full-time to AIDS.

But at many papers, AIDS is already yesterday’s news. A San Francisco Examiner rep said that “we used to have an AIDS beat. Don’t now.” Los Angeles Times City Editor Bill Boyarsky said that they’ve never had an AIDS beat, though reporters in LA and Washington file stories. The Washington Post has no AIDS beat, but has its gay-beat reporter, among others, do AIDS stories.

New York City AIDS advocates predict the change at the Times means news of the epidemic will suffer. Marty Algaze, the new communications manager at GMHC, said that now “we will have to get through bureaucracy at the Times to find the person that we need to reach out to.” He worries about continually having to bring reporters up to speed who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of

the epidemic. Housing Works, the activist-minded agency for homeless PWAs, enjoyed a post–AIDS beat front-page story on one of its court victories over Mayor Rudy Giuliani as well as a Metro section profile. But the group's legislative counsel, Michael Kink, is concerned, too—that Times reporting will lose "the serious public health and social context of the epidemic."

Also dumped by the Times last fall was bombastic columnist and former exec Rosenthal, the person many hold responsible for the paper's failure to cover the emerging epidemic. While panic swept through the gay community in 1981 and 1982, the paper of record did all of five stories on the mysterious illness, setting the glacial pace for media coverage across the nation. A review of the Times' annual indexes shows that from 1983 to 1985—when Rock Hudson's death finally made AIDS a mainstream story—there are no more than two pages of entries (at about 65 citations per page) under AIDS. Coverage didn't peak until 1987 with Frankel's ascension. On his watch, a committee created a formal AIDS beat that resulted in more than 13 pages of index entries, including stories by ACT UP target Gina Kolata and open PWA Jeffrey Schmalz. Since 1993, coverage has held steady at about five pages of entries per year.

Even now, Lawrence K. Altman, MD, will continue to cover medical developments in AIDS as he has since the 1980s. Jennifer Steinhauser in New York and Sheryl Gay Stolberg in Washington, DC, will occasionally file AIDS stories. But without one reporter devoted to tracking AIDS in all its social, cultural and political complexity, the epidemic threatens to slip off the radar.

In Frankel's memoir, The Times of My Life, he recounts how the AIDS beat was established after years of neglect and concludes, "We need still more articles that dramatize and explain the problem—for others to 'solve'—so that years from now we shall be seen to have done our duty." By ending 12 years of AIDS beat reporting, the Times seems to have decided that it has atoned for its earlier crimes. Whether the paper's new, more casual arrangement for covering the epidemic will usher in a new era of neglect is for tomorrow's readers to judge.

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