The Way We War

A tale of two cities, 11 sluts and one trick question

February 1, 1997 By Richard Berkowitz, MD

The PWA self-empowerment movement, which has repudiated once and for all the idea of patient as victim, was officially born in June 1983 at the National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference in Denver, Colorado. For the first time, 11 gay men with AIDS -- most from New York City or San Francisco -- made the case to some 400 health care workers that people with AIDS were to play a leading role in all decisions affecting their lives.

We came to Denver as sick people and left as activists. The friendships and romances forged kept us alive and fighting for years to come and, of course, made the deaths terrible to bear. We marched in parades, testified before legislatures, started newsletters and hot lines, organized PWA coalitions. Against a barrage of medical reports that an AIDS diagnosis was a death sentence and media images of PWAs as disfigured monsters, we gave the most stigmatized disease of our time a human face. I'm the last survivor of those 11 men.

Bobbi Campbell, a San Francisco nurse, was the first person ever to go public as a PWA. Along with Dan Turner, Campbell founded People With AIDS San Francisco, the first organization of its kind, and organized the first AIDS candlelight vigil, leading a march with a 20-foot red banner that read FIGHTING FOR OUR LIVES. At the same time, a handful of gay men with AIDS in New York City was meeting in a weekly support group, with Michael Callen its queen mother.

In Denver, the two cadres immediately clashed. The New Yorkers were uneasy about how the men from San Francisco kept hugging and holding one another and taking time for spiritual reflection -- a far cry from our tendency to complain, yell and curse. But our differences went deeper than style. We argued over treatment approaches (holistic or mainstream), the cause of AIDS (single agent or multiple infections) and, most fiercely, the connection between promiscuity, STDs and immune deficiency (a theory advocated by New York but denounced as homophobic by San Francisco).

One night at dinner, Michael Callen suddenly asked, "Who here knows how to take two dicks at once?" Opinions flew as Michael picked up two spoons and demonstrated his own technique. But, in fact, it was a trick question intended to reveal exactly what, other than AIDS, the 11 of us had in common: We were all sluts. By accepting the role of promiscuity in the development of AIDS, as personally painful and politically provocative as it was, Michael told us we could lead the way in protecting the gay community by promoting and having safer sex. For 11 men made to feel like

lepers while aching more than ever for affection, this was a revelation.

Led by Callen and Campbell, we drafted a declaration of interdependence that we presented at the close of the conference, with the FIGHTING FOR OUR LIVES banner unfurled in our hands. Eventually dubbed the Denver Principles, this 17-point statement began: "We condemn attempts to label us as *victims*, a term which implies defeat, and we are only occasionally *patients*, a term which implies passivity, helplessness and dependence upon the care of others. We are *people with AIDS*." We recommended that doctors treat PWAs as whole people while acknowledging their own agendas and anxieties, that PWAs be involved in all AIDS organizations' decision making and that the rights of PWAs be respected. The audience responded with a 10-minute standing ovation. They were cheering, but they were also weeping. At a time when all that was asked of us was to lie down and die, we were 11 gay men in the prime of life -- 11 people with AIDS, 11 people with courage, dignity and pride -- going off to war.

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