The Wizard of Roz

Rosalind Moore-Bey could save souls.

February 1, 1999 By Laura Whitehorn

Prisoners with HIV lost a beloved advocate when Rosalind Simpson Moore-Bey died of AIDS on the first of June last year at her home in Washington, DC. Roz's name should be as familiar to AIDS activists outside the walls as it is to the thousands who passed through the DC Jail or CTF (Central Treatment Facility). She did time there and also with me at the old Federal Women's Prison in Lexington, Kentucky, in the '80s and early '90s. Back then, the medical establishment, government and media rarely recognized that women get HIV. As a result, many went undiagnosed, suffering terribly and dying quickly.

Despite the presence of HIV positive inmates at Lexington, the prison made no effort to inform the women about AIDS. When a group of prisoners got together to try to educate ourselves and to conduct discussion groups, we found that our fellow inmates' fear that they were even suspected of having HIV kept them from attending our events.

In this climate, Roz did one of the bravest things I've seen in more than 13 years in prison. She stood up at a meeting of over 400 women and said, "I am living with AIDS. I am proof that AIDS is not just a death sentence. We have to love ourselves and one another." What followed was an outpouring of interest, grief, need—all enabling us to do an enormous amount of education and support. Roz was at the heart of this work, even when she was stuck in the prison hospital for weeks at a time.

I know she saved lives with her teaching and preaching; I believe she saved some souls, too. Needless to say, Roz often exhausted herself working when she should have been resting. And she was often the target of idiotic AIDS-phobia, as when a cellmate tried to bring a lawsuit against the prison for locking her up with Roz. All the while, she was doing battle with her own demons, including the agony of the infections attacking her body and the pain of rejection by some people she loved.

In 1993, thanks to the commitment and hard work of some progressive lawyers in DC, Roz was one of the nation's first prisoners with AIDS to receive compassionate release on parole. Having been at death's door enough times to be paying rent there, Roz was a more than deserving candidate. A year after her release, she married a terrific partner, James Moore, and together they struggled for her life.

Never in the five years after her release did she stop fighting for prisoners with HIV. Walking despite the painful neuropathy that had her wheelchair-bound at times and toting her portable oxygen tank, she returned to lead support groups at the DC prison and to do outreach to any organization that might help prisoners with HIV.

Now, when I meet women sent into the federal system from DC, they never just say, “Oh yeah, I’ve met Roz.” Instead, they take the time to tell me about how she helped them—did something no one else had been able or willing to do. How necessary Roz has been to so many people.

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