The amfAR’s new clothes

As Dr. Mathilde Krim “a.k.a. the Mother of AIDS advocacy” passes the amfAR torch to classy designer Kenneth Cole, her once-great institution may claim it’s not losing a legend but gaining a brand name. But can its new leader see past the bottom line to make amfAR not only fashionable but relevant again?

June 1, 2005 By Michael Musto

Some 20 years ago, in the depths of AIDS stigma, Dr. Mathilde Krim left the lab to devote her extraordinary energies and A-list access to raising money for the disease—particularly the pioneering research of colleague Dr.Joseph Sonnabend. Her matronly accent-and-bun performances launched what became the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR). Well into the ’90s, with assists from the likes of Elizabeth Taylor and Sharon Stone, amfAR remained the beacon for finding and funding neglected HIV research. Then, under intense activist pressure, the feds and big pharma got into the game, committing megabucks to drug development. Little amfAR began to flounder. The org leaned on marketing über-whiz and longtime board member Kenneth Cole. He and wife Maria Cuomo (former New York governor Mario’s daughter) crafted bold, splashy appeals. The progressive power couple kept the cred and cash coming, even as the cause fell out of fashion. AmfAR’s crafty, crusading advocacy in DC won kudos, too. Still, it increasingly had a mission in name only.

Now, six months after Cole stepped into Krim’s well-worn chairman-of-the-board shoes, POZ asked contributing writer Michael Musto to drop by Cole’s design firm for a chat. LaMusto, himself a veteran AIDS activist, toasted Krim and Cole’s contribution, swapped war stories—and then got down to business. Armed with an informal POZ poll of fellow activists that gives the org poor reviews in recent years, he presented the activists’ own immodest proposal: By flexing its strongest muscles—advocacy with awesome attitude—amfAR can reclaim its once-critical mission. But it must meet an urgent new need: funding research into condom-based prevention, decimated by a Bush administration assault. The new leader’s answer?

Read on....

POZ: Dr. Krim, what’s going on with this change of personnel?
Krim: Passing the baton to somebody who’s young, energetic and compassionate is ideal for this position. I hope I will have a little more free time.

POZ: What do you miss doing the most?
Krim: I don’t even know what I miss because I’ve not done it for a number of years! [She laughs.]

Cole: I don't believe she'll be able to stray far. As often as she might try, I think she'll find herself back by my side.

POZ: With a whip? Anyway, Kenneth, should amfAR be doing more advocacy in DC?
Cole: The advocacy is important, but we have to be realistic. At the end of the day, it's going to be an encumbrance rather than a mechanism to move forward. We're a public-health organization, and we need to focus on our mission. My goal is to energize and invigorate a very able organization. It's an opportunity to seek innovative approaches to traditional problems, which is what I do for a living.

POZ: Is that harder than ever in Bush's second term, when the anti-sex, anti-condoms and anti-science agenda has set everything back?
Cole: I don't want to be quoted saying that, because I believe that with the right intention, there are ways of working together. We have three and a half more years [of Bush] and we [must] move forward. Rather than deal with why we're not, I'd rather deal with how we're going to. You can't plant yourself on a pedestal and speak down. You have to speak eye to eye and be realistic.

POZ: Are Bush's policies all bad?
Krim: The government supports faith-based organizations, and they can do a lot of good. A gay friend of mine in Florida has an interest in AIDS and wanted to help his community, so he hooked up with the local religious organization. They get money from the government; he gets part of it; and he uses it. There are ways around things sometimes!

POZ: I bet a lot of AIDS activists are suddenly going to pretend to be very religious.
Krim: Yes!

POZ: Do you think the condom and clean-needle messages are getting through?
Krim: They should. Fortunately, people don't listen too much yet to the anti-sex.
Cole: There is factual, documented evidence that clean needles work. Some people think that promotes drug use, but it doesn't. And condoms do curb the spread of HIV. They do not, in fact, promote intercourse.

POZ: Well, another reality is that POZ could find no one to say a bad word about either of you, unfortunately. [Both laugh.] But some AIDS activists do say amfAR hasn't funded enough experimental,out-of-the-box projects, just a lot of things the **NIH** also funded.
Krim: We have tried to avoid that. But it's not always possible. Sometimes to confirm a result or deny what somebody else has said is useful, too. A little repetition is good.

POZ: What's been amfAR's biggest triumph?
Krim: A woman had an idea to try prevention of transmission from a pregnant animal to the baby with AZT. Nobody wanted to fund her. She came to us,and we gave her $50,000. In '96, it first became applicable to humans, and that saved the lives of thousands of kids.

POZ: Regrets?

Krim: When we see something deserving and we don't have the money, that breaks my heart. That's one reason why the involvement of Kenneth is wonderful. He can communicate and knows the right people. He talks to his peers when he fundraises. I don't. I talk like a nice little scientist.
Cole: Dr. Krim is colorful, unique. There's nothing contrived, and she says what she feels.

POZ: And now she's blushing!
Cole: She's inspired me over the years. But you build up a fatigue. AIDS just goes on and on. You say to yourself, "Why doesn't this get better? Why can't we communicate this to our fellow human beings, who are supposedly a higher species?"

POZ: I've heard amfAR has had an easier time raising money from the European species.
Cole: No. The world of not-for-profit is not a functioning element in most European countries. The processes don't encourage it. You don't get the tax benefits.

POZ: To help you make more money, who will be the new face of amfAR? Beyoncé? Lindsay Lohan? Me?
Cole: We'll find extraordinary messengers. I don't know if it needs to be a specific individual.
Krim: Elizabeth Taylor was ideal in the early '80s to speak to the middle-class white community. Elizabeth spoke of compassion, and she did it on a grand scale. Sharon Stone was the right person to talk about youth. Sharon can be a clown sometimes. She's terrific as an auctioneer and spokesperson. And Harry Belafonte just joined our board.

POZ: At the beginning, did amfAR exaggerate statistics and say AIDS was more of a heterosexual threat in order to get people to fork over money?
Krim: No! I was accused of that. But I said it was a heterosexual threat because viruses don't choose their victims. It can be anybody. I even said it was going to become a female disease, which has happened slowly.

POZ: What have you learned, Dr. Krim?
Krim: I knew nothing about the gay community in 1981. Dr. Joseph Sonnabend sent me his patients, including Michael Callen, who told me what gay life was. That was quite an education! I was disgusted by the way society accused gay men of having created something terrible. When you think of it, the promiscuous life was caused by society—it didn't allow gay men to get married or to have honest relationships. They had to hide.

POZ: That's too complex for most homophobes to grasp. What's your main genius, Kenneth: designing, leading or advertising?
Cole: You're leading the witness, your honor. I think I'm sometimes blinded by ambition. My goal is to cure AIDS. I'm focused on looking at the finishing line and going in that direction.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.