They Shoot Barebackers, Don’t They?

Tony Valenzuela is AIDS activism’s most misunderstood man.

February 1, 1999 By Stephen Gendin

Tony Valenzuela never intended to be the Poster Boy of Unsafe Sex. Yet virtually overnight, after an impromptu speech about his sex life at the November 1997 Creating Change Conference in San Diego, this rising star of gay activism was reborn as a pariah of the movement. Creating Change is the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF)’s annual lovefest of hard-core politicos that Valenzuela, a local leader, had helped bring to his hometown. That he served as the event co-chair only added insult to injury. After his talk, Valenzuela was condemned in the press and by longtime allies. The then-29-year-old HIV positive Valenzuela, who had it all -- beauty, brains, a soft-spoken but steely charisma and a proud half-Mexican, half-Italian heritage -- became the sacrificial lamb at the altar of AIDS angst and anger.

His sin? He not only confessed to loving anal sex without condoms but did so to a standing-room-only crowd of 2,000 gay and lesbian honchos, many of whom were veterans of the good fight at barricades and in boardrooms since the ’70s. The incident was a microcosm of community sex wars: Two hours before the confab, a speaker dropped out and at the request of NGLTF leaders, Valenzuela agreed to fill in, frantically cobbling together a speech. That evening’s town-hall meeting -- convened to discuss recent attacks on public sex and promiscuity by gay marriage-and-monogamy neo-cons -- was guaranteed high theater: The rhetorical battles and personal attacks between the SexPanic! activists (including me, a cofounder) and gay journalists such as Michelangelo Signorile and Andrew Sullivan had all the civility of sniper fire. The last to take the podium, Valenzuela nervously gritted his teeth and proceeded to give an intensely personal talk that no one was likely to forget.

Valenzuela spoke about his work in the sex industry as an escort and as the first openly HIV positive porn actor in the United States, but all that anyone seemed to hear was the sex scenes. While he said, “I entered my sexual identity, coming of age in AIDS, and forming a relationship to HIV that is unlikely to be shared by the architects of HIV prevention,” he also said, “The level of erotic charge and intimacy I feel when a man comes inside me is transformational, especially in a climate which so completely disregards its importance.” His cautionary caveat -- “When I talk about having unprotected sex, I am speaking for myself, and not as a proponent of condomless sex for all” -- was undercut by his defiant assertions -- “I am a sex gourmet in a community serving sexual TV dinners ... and I have placed myself in the middle of HIV anarchy.” Even I still feel a chill up my spine when I recall his words. It was too much information, too fast. The personal had become more political than he could have imagined.

Now, a year and another Creating Change later, Valenzuela admits to having made mistakes. We're sitting in his room in Pittsburgh's William Penn Westin Hotel, and the halls practically hum with the words *race, class* and *gender* and lesbian and gay activists gossiping and flirting, debating the Millennium March and the Matthew Shepard murder.

But Valenzuela isn't humming. He's low-key as we start the interview, and he still seems a bit shell-shocked by last year's debacle. "I realize I failed to acknowledge the huge amounts of loss people have gone through," he says quietly. "So it was shocking for many of them to hear about a behavior that essentially wiped out a generation of men they had loved." He pauses. "I should have let the audience know that I feel that loss too, painfully and directly." Yet as the founder of a San Diego group for young HIV positive men, Twentysomething Positives, Valenzuela was used to uncensored discussions about raw sex and semen-sharing as intense pleasure, deep intimacy, spiritual release, the ultimate taboo and more. "There's an established and careful discourse among many young gay men," he says. "They wouldn't have blinked an eye if they'd been in the audience."

But the 1997 NGLTF crowd did more than blink an eye -- it went through the roof. One after another, community leaders stood up in outrage. Yelling matches rocked the hall as Valenzuela's few defenders countered the furious consensus, while the moderator struggled unsuccessfully to keep order. Robin Tyler, a longtime lesbian activist, summed up the anger at Valenzuela with a comment that was loudly applauded and later widely quoted: "Lesbians have been, in a way, the wife of the gay male movement. You got sick, and we were there. I'm not saying, 'We did this for you, and therefore you've got to be a good boy.' But you wonder why we're so upset. Because 15 years later, when we're facing breast cancer [and other problems], we're hearing 'I want to do what I want.' Well, *do what you want.* But I'm not going to be there to clean up after you this time. I have too much pain." In the weeks and months after the event, blistering opinion pieces and editorials ran, and by last summer the vote was in: Tony was toxic.

Villain is an unlikely role for Valenzuela. Having not seen him for a while, I'd almost forgotten how appealing he is -- downright sexy, really. Although he describes himself as femme, with his clear, strong gaze, self-assured movements and form-fitting shirts, he has a snappy masculine image. I first met Valenzuela in 1995, when he approached me with questions about a speech I'd just given on the shutting down of New York City's commercial sex venues. We spent a few hours together, chatting about sexual politics (what else?), and we were on the brink of a kiss when his roommate showed up. Valenzuela was enthusiastic and brimming with plans for work to be done back in San Diego. Even then he came across as more than the typical activist: His intense interest in sex and his willingness to talk openly about it were, to say the least, unusual.

Since then life as a self-described sex radical has taken its toll. With his reputation so damaged, last August Valenzuela moved from San Diego to Los Angeles. Though he'd been a best-and-brightest member of the San Diego gay scene, with two years' work at the community center under his belt and many hours with PFLAG and the Latino organization GLOW, now his name was mud. "Someone put a threatening note on my car saying, 'We're watching you, AIDS motherfucker,' " he tells me. "I was ostracized all over town. People I'd worked with wouldn't meet

eyes with me." He has hunkered down, cutting back on gay activism to concentrate on other interests -- all of which are, characteristically, likely to raise eyebrows: his thriving escort business, a new porn movie called *Something About Larry* from Hollywood Video, and his writing, which has appeared in *Genre* and *Gay Community News.*

It's humbling to interview someone I know: I see how limited my understanding of that person can be. Back in 1995 while I was finding Tony so bright and alluring, it turns out that he was "going through a dark time."

That was the year he tested positive. "The first thing I did when I found out I was positive was get fucked by my boyfriend without a condom," Valenzuela says. "It was the first time I ever had the sensation of another's man's come inside me." He and his then-boyfriend had planned to celebrate the results with a romantic weekend in Palm Springs: Whether the news was good or bad, at least it would put an end to Valenzuela's chronic fear. "For years and years, all of my sexual experiences were cut with this sheer terror of HIV," he says. "It was to the point where I was almost a hypochondriac about it" -- even though he says he had only had unsafe sex a few times.

Like many gay men, Valenzuela recalls a sense of relief at finally getting the virus -- the flip side of terror. While the first few months after his seroconversion were easy, life soon soured. He broke up with his boyfriend, and the reality of his HIV status set in. Then he contracted hepatitis A and B. Meantime, he was dutifully disclosing that he was positive to his family and friends. Some expressed sympathy, while others -- fellow activists, specifically -- were working from a different script. "I found a lot of attacks and judgment," he says. "I was being pathologized, told I had a death wish." It stunned him that people were lashing out, as though by letting himself get infected, he had betrayed their trust.

Disclosing his status opened his eyes to the "hypocrisy and lying" among gay men when the subject turns to sex. Like many of his peers, he had long been disenchanted with what he was hearing from HIV organizations because they didn't begin to acknowledge what gay men were really doing. "There's no space or safety to explore desire -- like talking about semen exchange and how in moments of lust, moments of intimacy, a different set of priorities rushes through your body," he says. "And now I was being blamed for not staying uninfected. I got depressed," he tells me. "Finally I had this fantasy of getting in a car accident, so I wouldn't have to deal. I just wanted to quit everything."

Near desperation, in November 1996 he moved back to his parents' house in Tijuana, Mexico, for three months. "I'm a momma's boy," Valenzuela says with a laugh. He proudly describes how his mother ardently follows *all* of his activities. While she is overwhelmingly supportive, there are "points of tension."

Is it the escort business? The porn career? The barebacking?

"My mom gets worried about reinfection," he says then.

By the time of his 1997 speech, Valenzuela had more than recuperated: He was on a mission. “When I took the podium, I see now, I was trying to send a message to other gay men: ’Don’t let them call you crazy for wanting to bareback,’” he says. “I wanted to get rid of shame by being vocal about the things so many positive men do silently. I certainly wasn’t out to encourage anyone not to use condoms.”

But in many people’s eyes, that’s exactly what he was doing. Linda Bessemer, the president of the San Diego PFLAG chapter, put it bluntly in a letter to local gay papers: "Tony is responsible for speaking out to a room full of young students, parents and community members with the words *It is OK to have unprotected sex whether you or your partner is HIV-infected or not because it is the only way you can experience the spiritual aspect of sexuality.*"

Valenzuela disagrees. “Telling my experience doesn’t cancel out the message of prevention,” he says. “I wish everyone was as specific about their desires and fantasies. It would open up discussion and demonstrate thousands of ways that people enjoy sex.” If he sees himself as a role model, it is for his advocacy of the raw truth rather than raw sex. And he calls it “ironic” that in attacking his message, these dyed-in-the-wool progressives took a line similar to the one that their opponents use against sex ed and condom distribution in schools: That it will promote the behavior. “We need to trust that young gay men will be wise in their decisions,” he says. “They’re not passive victims or mindless consumers who can be told to do something, and they do it. It’s a huge disrespect to do otherwise.”

Valenzuela has won some public support, and his second-biggest defender is Eric Rofes, a longtime activist and the author of two books on the psychological effects of AIDS on gay men. “By discussing anal sex as a valuable, meaningful act for many gay men, Valenzuela shattered a powerful taboo that had taken root during the crisis years of the AIDS epidemic,” Rofes said in a keynote speech in conjunction with 1998’s Creating Change. “We’d become accustomed to expecting fags to maintain a public silence about the wide discrepancy between the ways many AIDS groups publicly represented gay men’s sex lives, and what we knew was occurring in gay communities throughout the nation.”

Valenzuela’s mom is his number-one backer. “She has this natural understanding of why gay men would have problems with condoms,” he says, adding that he finds it “sad, but in a way comforting” that an older, straight woman can understand the value of skin-on-skin sex when many gay leaders can’t.

As Valenzuela and I sit next to each other on the hotel bed -- he’s talking and I’m taking notes -- I realize that sometime over the years, the sexual charge has gone out of our friendship. Now we will never make love. I regret it -- losing out on an experience at which he is so expert. Still, I’m not blind to his charisma. Here is a beautiful, confident gay man who knows what he wants and goes for it. Of course, that sometimes makes the less lucky or plucky uncomfortable.

More vicious than the upset at Valenzuela’s words has been the public attempt to shame him for his personal sexual practices. When people called him a murderer, it was less because he talked

about the spiritual value of semen exchange than because he did it himself. Having myself faced a hue and cry for a June 1997 *POZ* column I wrote about my own experience as a bareback bottom, I sympathize with the grief Valenzuela feels, an outcast in his own tribe. It isn't easy making yourself a target. But suddenly I find myself in the role of devil's advocate, questioning him on the morality of a positive man not using condoms, especially when he's not disclosing his HIV status.

Valenzuela is quick on the draw. "I certainly have a code of sexual ethics," he says. "It may not be what a lot of people do, but it's moral." And had his critics asked about what he does in bed, he would have been happy to enlighten them. "I'm strictly a bareback bottom," he tells me. "And I believe the risk for those who top bareback is minimal."

In his work as an escort -- the thought of getting paid to please had always intrigued him -- he has found a new kind of economic freedom. "I have good clients who are proud of me," he says. "They know I'm positive, and they follow the news of my activities -- like my mother."

In spring 1997, he decided to break into the porn industry. His motives were mixed. "I wanted people to see me as 'Wow, here's this guy who is an activist and also makes porn.' To show you could do both," he says. "Plus, the money is good." Valenzuela's dream -- to blaze a trail where even those who call themselves "respectable" could admit to being turned on by public sex -- was soon shattered: The video company attempted to drop him when they discovered he had HIV. Suddenly he was battling them to honor his contract. They finally gave in, and a script with a hokey HIV angle was shot. "The project was from start to finish a compromise," Valenzuela says. "I tried to rewrite the script several times, but I finally just gave in. It's called *Positively Yours.* It wasn't any good." I agree. It's all preachy message (Even an HIV positive man can have a sex life!) and no porn.

Even after working hours, Valenzuela stresses that he is a responsible sex partner. He is primarily attracted to older, urban, gay-identified men, avoiding young rubes or first-timers. "I don't enter sexual situations with 19-year-olds who just moved from Iowa," he says. "I assume there is a body of knowledge these men have." He meets most sex partners through America Online (AOL) and his "member profile screams that I'm positive," although it doesn't say so specifically. He says that he always replies truthfully when asked about his status.

As I nod in agreement, I consider that Valenzuela's explanation will fail to satisfy many in the community who believe it's always immoral for a positive man to have sex without condoms. This is a chasm unlikely to be bridged anytime soon.

Has it been worth it? I ask him.

His yes is firm. "I'm not interested in any kind of work or movement that suppresses the truth," he says. "And I think I made a difference." He points to last July, when he led a workshop at the National Lesbian and Gay Health Association's annual conference. The topic again was barebacking, but the reception he got was markedly different. "People were appreciative but cautious. There was a willingness to hear a touchy subject without denying it -- people weren't alarmist."

What about his reception at this year’s Creating Change?

“I’m glad I came. What’s key to me is that I spoke to people who had dissed me. They apologized,” he says. “People respect you if you keep coming back.”

By speaking his own truth -- no matter how politically incorrect or painful -- he created a space for other gay men to do so as well. At a time when most national gay organizations are focusing on gay marriage and projecting a conservative “we’re just like everyone else” image, gay men who live outside the mainstream have little guidance. The rules don’t cover the complexities of their lives. HIV positive men have particularly hard choices, especially in an era where nondisclosure of HIV status is increasingly a criminal act and many are prosecuted and publicly humiliated -- even when they’ve used condoms. Most struggle in isolation. “There are lots of people like me going through the process of creating new moral or sexual codes, only they’re doing it privately,” Valenzuela says. "That’s what I meant by *HIV anarchy* -- which pushed everybody’s button."

Does that mean no rules? I ask.

“It means finding yourself beyond the established rules,” he says, “and having to make up your own.”

I suggest that maybe *HIV anarchy* isn’t the best phrase.

Valenzuela laughs. “I was trying to be poetic,” he says. “Oh, well.”

As we wind up the interview and get ready to go out for dinner, an older, wiser, but still ornery Valenzuela says: “Make sure you quote me somewhere as saying I stand by my message. The unprotected sex I described [at Creating Change] was beautiful, intimate, satisfying. I didn’t shower afterward. We slept with his come inside me.”

Is there anything else he wants to tell *POZ* readers?

He considers this for a moment. “The reason why I talked about barebacking -- and continue to -- is because I love and respect gay men,” he says. “Talking honestly about what we do and feel is best for us. The better we understand our desires, the better we control them.”

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