To The Editor

January 1, 1999

Bible Thumpers

I have subscribed to POZ for several years, and I enjoy it. But I did a severe knee jerk seeing "former homosexual" Michael Johnston in the magazine ("Post-Gay Poster Guy," October 1998). In the crusade for the end of AIDS and for community tolerance, his venom is doing more harm than anyone else's I can think of. I realize POZ is not a gay magazine—it is for people with HIV issues—but please spare me the surprise of having the likes of Michael Johnston in your pages. Being gay and having AIDS, I have enough self-esteem issues to deal with without having the likes of that filth sneaking into my magazine.

Chuck Sites
Henderson, Nevada

I was quite surprised to read the profile of Michael Johnston. I admire his courage in taking a stand against what he knows to be a sinful and immoral lifestyle. I too have lived an openly gay and bisexual lifestyle, in what is known as "Sin City" New Orleans—the French Quarter. I have been afflicted with HIV and incarcerated so that I might learn the error of my ways. It would do all PWAs some good to recognize that HIV is a wake-up call to turn from the sinful lifestyle that brought on this dreadful disease in the first place.

Daniel Bayley
Washington Correctional Institution
Angie, Louisiana

Your profile on my fellow Texan Michael Johnston caused me to shudder. Like most homosexuals, I recall the depth of fear about my born self while growing up. Imagining Johnston's "preaching"—and people sucking up his false words—reminds me of one thing: Some Nazis also practiced Christianity while they participated in cold-blooded murder.

I hope Johnston takes comfort in knowing that he is causing people to turn away from who they are. Will he ever know how many people will not just turn away but also take their own lives as a result of his words, because they fear there's nowhere else in this world for them?

We queers have a place in this world, even with our HIV positive status. The small-minded, unenlightened people who hide behind a very small book are only causing pain and suffering while they claim to be holy and speaking “God’s love.” We can only hope Johnston will find himself as a whole person and be proud of who he is, ceasing his battle to turn the world against his and our natural sexuality.

Rex Toltschin
Dallas

Hype or Realism

The article about marketing drugs was a little off-base (“Climb Every Mountain,” October 1998). Advertising is advertising! Ads are about selling hope, beauty and a happier, longer life. Almost all marketing takes the “sell the sizzle, not the steak” approach. As far as protease inhibitor ads not showing the side effects, you don’t see drunk people in beer ads or fat slobs having a heart attack in McDonald’s ads. I feel sorry for people who are stupid enough to base their medication selections on an ad, instead of researching and working with their doctors.

Bruce Lazarus
Cincinnati

Ride Pride

“Open Wide, AIDS Ride” by Stuart Timmons was biased, sloppy journalism (October 1998). I’ve participated in four rides and raised nearly $18,000—95 percent of that money came from straight people who would not otherwise have given to agencies serving PWAs. Destructive criticism can destroy the AIDS Rides. It did in Philadelphia. Let’s make them better, not destroy them.

John Kauderer
East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania

How helpful of POZ to run an out-of-date, inaccurate and innuendo-filled hatchet job on Dan Pallotta and the AIDS Rides just as several thousand of us were trying to finish our fundraising for the Boston to New York ride.

As a three-time rider, I can attest firsthand to the professionalism and high standards of the Pallotta organization and the personal feeling of accomplishment shared by the riders. And I’ve made my peace with the costs of the ride. Pallotta is a smart, dedicated, hardworking man who has chosen to devote his considerable talents to the fight against AIDS. I think he has earned every penny he has made many times over.

Harold Levine
New York City

As a person with AIDS who has ridden in three of the five California AIDS Rides, I must comment on your article. While I would love it if every single dollar that was raised for the AIDS Rides went to the benefiting organizations, that's simply not possible in the real world. Does anyone think that you can feed and house 2,500 riders and 500 crew and staff for seven days without incurring significant costs? Does anyone think that the rides would attract anywhere near the number of dedicated riders and raise the amount of money that they do if riders had to "rough it"? I don't think so.

As for Dan Pallotta's salary: I have no idea how much he makes, but I do know that whatever it is, it's not nearly enough. My participation in the AIDS Rides changed my life, and they have changed the lives of everyone I know who has participated. It has made me believe in myself and the limitless possibilities that life has in store for me, as I live with AIDS. It's that simple.

Rob Bergstein
Via the Internet

The AIDS Rides are probably the best thing that could happen to those with HIV. Millions of dollars go to AIDS-related agencies as a result of these rides. I agree that Dan Pallotta gets quite a good share of the donations, but having participated in two rides myself, it is money well spent. Pallotta makes sure that all riders and crew are well taken care of during the adventure. This could have something to do with the fact that we keep coming back year after year.

The AIDS Ride community is something that everyone should experience. Thousands get together with one common goal. There is a beautiful sense of camaraderie and caring—something not experienced once these folks return to their homes or jobs. The two Raleigh to DC rides I've participated in have been life-changing experiences.

Maureen Batch
Mechanicsville, Maryland

Stuart Timmons responds: *The good work of the AIDS Rides should be made better. If riders want to improve the lot of people with HIV, demand that Dan Pallotta open his books (he won't), talk with investigative reporters (he refuses) and maximize PWA proceeds as strenuously as he pampers riders and corporate sponsors. Pallotta's public relations do not encourage accountability. Journalism does. No one addressed the substance of the concerns my piece raised. If dulling the group glow is a by-product of the hard truth, so be it.*

Jump for Joy

Sean Strub's October 1998 S.O.S. was wonderful. As an experienced PWA, frankly I'm tired of the "AIDS as crisis/panic/war" stance that most politically correct media adopt. I have found that within this mind-set there is often guilt and shame directed at those of us who, even when ill, choose to live through joy rather than through pain (and especially so if our joy includes the experience of ourselves as sexual seekers). We can't deny the collective and personal tragedy that AIDS has been; however, I am ready for a "post-AIDS identity." And to me, this will mean a much more powerful expression of joy, gratitude and happiness, even when such emotions are difficult to hold to. The editorial validated the capacity for joy we have right now, come what may. The trick is, in the depths of our darkness, to act as if the light has already come.

Paul Wood
New York City

The October S.O.S. was beautifully moving. What Sean Strub said is what I have been trying to express to my family and friends for many years.

Jack Martin
Los Angeles

Got a Bad Hep

There was an inaccuracy in Bob Roehr's article on hepatitis C ("Liver Worst," September 1998). Roehr wrote that ribavirin is available at the PWA Health Group buyers club "at a greatly discounted price." But he simultaneously reported that the yearly cost of ribavirin in combo with interferon was between $6,400 and $8,600. A year's supply of ribavirin alone from the PWA Health Group runs about $4,820 for most people. Unless the group has very recently lowered the price, I fail to see any discount.

Halley Low
Brooklyn, New York

POZ responds: The price charged by manufacturer Schering-Plough is actually much higher than we incorrectly reported. The quoted price range is for a 24-week, not annual, course of the combo. Subtracting the company's price for interferon (since it refuses to sell ribavirin separately), that would leave a 24-week, 1,200-mg daily dose of ribavirin priced at $6,100. The price from the Health Group is $2,300 (62 percent less) for an equivalent dose imported from Mexico.

An “Aye” for an Eye

Congratulations on your well-written Letter From Nicaragua (“Plenty of Nothing,” September 1998). I was heartbroken upon reading it. I am a Nicaraguan-American who has lived in the United States for the past 20 years. I recently discovered that I am afflicted with AIDS. I feel so much empathy for Sergio, the 28-year-old PWA from Managua who is mentioned in the story. I pray that your work will open the eyes of many people, both in the government and private sectors, to the plight of those suffering with AIDS in Nicaragua.

Moises Raudez
Miami Beach, Florida

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