Truth or DARE

New Jersey can’t stopper syringe-swapper

April 1, 1999 By Gabi Horn

In 1993, Diana McCague, 38, founded the Chai Project, a New Jersey syringe swap whose name—Hebrew for life—matched its mission: To slow the spread of HIV in a state where 75 percent of new infections are caused by dirty needle sharing. Last December, after years of harrassment, a state judge fined McCague $780 and ordered her to do 100 hours of community service for unlawful needle distribution. McCague said she’d bag her fight. POZ *rang her up to get the real deal.*

You vowed to stop swapping syringes because you said your resolve was broken, but in January you led a 200-strong demo outside Governor Christine Todd Whitman’s office.
What am I supposed to do, take a nap for three years until a new governor is elected? I don’t think so. I said I’d stop distributing syringes—I never said I wouldn’t encourage others to do so. We’ve been forced to discontinue the most effective intervention for preventing HIV and hepatitis. Needle exchange won’t go away because Whitman opposes it. Governors are elected officials—not kings and queens.

So what’s your next strategy?
Legislators aren’t listening to poor people or people like me, but they are listening to the white middle class. We need to start knocking on those doors, talking to PTAs and church groups.

And what if swapping syringes remains illegal?
Oh my God, don’t even say that! I’ll bet that in 2001, when the governorship changes hands, it’ll be legal.

You were assigned to DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) for community service, but isn’t your harm-reduction philosophy the antithesis of DARE’s “Just Say No”?
Yeah, it’s twisted. Some say the judge is a sadist, but I think he’s just dense. For five years my life has been dedicated to community service. I work with people who DARE doesn’t help.

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