Unmasked Avenger

For Dana Kuhn, activism is the way, the truth and the light

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In 1983, Dana Kuhn, a 30-year-old Protestant minister in Richmond, Virginia, broke his left foot. It was then that Kuhn, who has very mild hemophilia, got blood-clotting factor for the first time. This single HIV-tainted transfusion was his life's undoing. Kuhn got the virus and unwittingly gave it to his wife. Four years later, she was dead of AIDS, leaving him a widower with two young children and a hole where his faith had been. "The biggest question that came to me was, 'Why me, God? I've committed by life to serving you, and now I'm stricken with a disease that took my wife's life and will take mine, too,'" this modern-day Job recalls.

But Dana had his kids to think of. He left his 1,000-family parish for a job at the Medical College of Virginia counseling families affected by HIV and hemophilia. Early in his tenure there, while sorting through a cardboard box containing the medical school's files on hemophilia and HIV, he made an astonishing discovery. Among the papers were some 200 documents that together showed how, in the early '80s, the blood industry, government agencies and the National Hemophilia Foundation (NHF) knowingly allowed the distribution of contaminated blood and blood products. Kuhn was stunned: He had stumbled upon a virtual arsenal of "smoking guns," irrefutable evidence of the blood scandal and its cover-up.

"I knew I had the truth in my hand, that our lives had been traded for money," he says. "I confronted everyone I could with the information-agency officials, attorneys and the NHF leadership. They all denied it." In disgust, Dana resigned from the NHF board. Then he turned his armory of official correspondence into a spiral-bound, chronologically ordered, 300-page book, titled it *The Trail of AIDS in the Hemophilia Community* and began handing out copies.

Dana Kuhn is now one of the nation's leading AIDS activists, and *The Trail of AIDS* a Pandora's box of revelation about, litigation against and redress from the companies that sold the killing blood. It persuaded members of Congress to call for an investigation leading to a landmark 1995 study and introduction of the Ricky Ray Hemophilia Relief Fund Act, which makes financial reparations to the hemophilia community for the U.S. government's role in the catastrophe. It also persuaded attorneys in both the United States and Japan to file a class-action suit against the blood industry.

A Capitol Hill regular, Kuhn has recently been flushing out congressional support for the Ricky Ray bill (with 244 cosponsors, it is set to be reintroduced this term). Somehow he found the time in

1990 to marry Jan Struckhoff, a nurse specializing in hemophilia (“so she knew what she was getting into”). And if his furious schedule makes him miss his 15-year-old son’s ice-hockey games or his 13-year-old daughter’s gymnastics meets, his activism is also a father’s gift to them. “I want my children to know the truth about what happened to their mother and to see I’m not going to let her life be taken in vain. I’m trying to show them that pursuing justice, preserving the truth, makes you a compassionate person,” he says.

Compassion is his calling. At a recent rally in Washington, D.C., his son and daughter at first hung back shyly from the crowd. But as the speakers told their stories, the kids joined in and finally yelled so much that they came home hoarse. “My kids are very understanding about people with AIDS. It wouldn’t surprise me if they become activists one day,” says Kuhn, who took the hard way back to find his God.

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