

# Urban Angels

Sam & Howard Josepher's big city problems

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Sam and Howard Josepher are mad as hell and I, for one, can't believe it. An hour ago, we met to talk about how they created AIDS Risk Reduction for IV Drug Users and Ex-Offenders (ARRIVE), a series of classes that teach people who are at high risk about AIDS. The Josephers speak about their success with ARRIVE in the friendly and familiar tones of you basic, run-of-the-mill do-gooders. Then suddenly their mood changes into anger. I can now see behind the generic altruism and into the raw frustration that truly drives AIDS activists associated with social service.

"We have found that the health epidemic which includes HIV, AIDS, tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases, is happening in about eight neighborhoods in New York City," says Howard indignantly. "These are the same neighborhoods that 75 percent of convicts in New York State prisons come from. If you can narrow it down, how can you tell me we can't do something about this? We don't have the desire or the will or the commitment."

"Or the leadership," says Sam. "The frustration we feel is that we see firsthand how this can be stopped. It's not a difficult task. You need to be organized and focused. Why does it always have to come from the people who have HIV or who are sick? They can't do it all."

The Josephers, who have been married for seven years and have a 6-year-old daughter, created ARRIVE in 1998 with a research grant from the National Institutes on Drug Abuse to teach parolees straight out of jail about AIDS. Howard wears a tie, and Sam is an actress with a wonderful New York accent and a halo of brown curly hair. They look so, well, *straight* I wondered how did a nice couple like them find themselves in a place like this? Howard was in jail, of course. He was smacked out on heroin 27 years ago. After rehab, he eventually became a psychotherapist. Sam taught corporate classes on communication and had been trained as a medic in the army. They started a group to educate ex-convicts who were needle users and were therefore at high risk for HIV.

"There were quite a few who were being tested in the 1980 [in prison] and were given no feedback, no counseling, no treatment," says Howard. "The people we were getting were not only in need of services, but were skeptical because they felt used."

It was a tricky balancing act to pull off because ARRIVE also had to encourage -- almost coax,

really -- at-risk offenders who hadn't been tested to get tested and then help them deal with the results.

Some of the people joining were still using drugs. "We decided the person getting high was the most at-risk person for spreading HIV," says Howard. "That's the one person we didn't want to lose." That thinking goes against most thinking on recovery, that being drug- or alcohol-free comes first. "AIDS really changed that whole concept of having to be drug-free to receive services," says Sam. "AIDS has to come first because that's the life threatening situation."

Classes at ARRIVE take place in nondescript rooms in the TriBeCa section of Manhattan and are taught by ex-offenders, ex-junkies or HIV positive instructors. The program lasts eight weeks, three nights a week, two-and-a-half hours per night. They learn everything from safe sex and meditation to preparing a résumé and the power of hope. Some people are still using drugs and nod out during class. "The last thing we want to do is drive them underground because of being ashamed for using," says Sam.

The hope, which has been borne out by the more than 1,500 graduates, is that ARRIVE creates people who can communicate and share the message. "They can go back to their communities and talk about what they know about AIDS," says Howard.

Since the original grant ended, the Josephers have become fundraisers themselves, surviving on donations from friends and other grants. They've widened who they include as families of users, and they have added an adolescent group partially funded by the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR).

Their immediate concern, however, is not funding but space. "We're here under duress," says Howard. "We're walking around with \$100,000 to pay in rent for the first year and there's no space. I've made bids on 40 places, but nothing."

What they need, of course, is an enlightened New York City landlord not afraid of renting to a group that helps HIV positive drug abusers.

The more the Josephers wait, the more frustrated they become. With the Josephers, these run-of-the-mill urban angels, AIDS activism has really hit home.