WORLD’s Champion

Rebecca Denison sees a need and fills it

December 1, 1994 By David Thomas

Like my older sister, whose relaxed walk and high chin conjure a natural authority that many people need tailored suits to carry off, Rebecca Denison is a commanding figure in a T-shirt and jeans. The first time I saw her was at the 1993 International AIDS Conference in Berlin leading a charge of women demanding that the tiny conference hall lounge space reserved for PWAs be expanded to accommodate more than a token 50 of the 1,000 HIV positive attendees. I followed her and her posse for more than two hours, scribbling notes on a notepad, until the conference organizers capitulated and her full-voiced demands quieted to a negotiator’s evenness.

Denison was born with a picket sign in her hand. She attended the University of California Santa Cruz, she tells me, for its emphasis on cooperative learning. (The beach didn’t hurt either.) As the scion of activist parents, UCSC’s political culture soon enthralled her. “It’s easy to become an activist there; everyone loves a demo,” she says. Quickly evolving from an English tutor for Latin American students to an activist concerned with Central American politics, she took a paralegal job in San Francisco after graduation, representing refugees applying for political asylum.

After her HIV test came back positive in 1990, dissatisfied with the support options for women -- “San Francisco had only two women’s HIV groups, and you had to be a lesbian for one and have full-blown AIDS for the other,” she says -- Denison turned to her experience in empowering others to launch WORLD (an acronym for Women Organized to Respond to Life-threatening Diseases).

Walking the walk as well as she does, she seems a natural-born ACT UP hellraiser. But her first encounter with the direct-action group was not pleasant. “ACT UP was scary because I was overwhelmed,” she says. “I think that most of us when we’re told we’re HIV positive are not the same strong person we are in other times. At least at first.” Another reason for her hesitation soon becomes clear. Denison stumbled across her first ACT UP demonstration two days after she got her HIV test back, outside her office. “Everyone’s chanting ’AIDS is a disaster, women die faster.’ I heard that women die six months after an AIDS diagnosis. I just didn’t understand the difference between HIV and AIDS. I just lost it. But ACT UP/Golden Gate, as it turned out, was the first place that really helped me.”

ACT UP helped a little financially as well as emotionally to kick start WORLD’s first project, its nationally distributed newsletter. But a little push from her HIV negative husband, Daniel (who

dropped everything and flew back to the U.S. from a teaching gig in Guatemala the same day she called about her test result), set the whole project in motion. “One day I was cleaning the house when Daniel called me into his room, held up a newsletter template he’d just designed on his computer, and said, ‘Look at this, here’s your newsletter -- go write it.’ So I did.”

Rebecca Denison is somehow chummy and imposing at the same time. And it’s this seamless mix of best friend and guardian angel that truly defines WORLD. The organization’s much-acclaimed, profile-heavy newsletter specializes in painting pictures of women who have stitched together life with HIV into a fabric of surprising strength and resilience. WORLD also organizes weekend retreats -- HIV positive women only, please. In a culture where so many women with HIV are isolated and afraid, Denison says that being surrounded by others living in the same emotional landscape is a visceral experience. “The first night of the retreat, we just sat in a circle, giddy, staring at each other with our jaws hanging open.”

Denison offers quick opinions: She believes in a community of HIV positive women. She applauds the efforts of HIV negative women against the pandemic, except for those “who create agendas without consulting us.” But despite her organizational skills and easy familiarity with the issues, I realize that a large part of WORLD’s growing success depends on the take-me-or-leave-me charm of Rebecca Denison.

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