“French Spider-Man” Swings Into GMHC

Alain Robert was arrested in 2008 for scaling The New York Times Building to raise awareness of global warming. For his court-ordered community service in 2009, he took on another cause—HIV/AIDS.

March 26, 2009 By James Wortman

He might not grace comic book covers, bed sheets or lunchboxes and he doesn't have a blockbuster film franchise under his belt, but Alain Robert—the real-life "French Spider-Man" (as the media call him)—has his fair share of admirers nonetheless.

Known for scaling some of the tallest buildings in the world to raise awareness for causes ranging from homelessness to HIV prevention, Robert is probably most famous in the United States for ascending a side of the 52-story New York Times Building to protest global warming. During his climb in June 2008, he hung a bright green banner on the building. It read: "Global warming kills more people than 9/11 every week."



Alain Robert at GMHC

Of course, along with the physical dangers of his climbing—which he does without safety equipment or the superpowers of his Marvel Comics namesake—comes some legal risk. He was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct, which has no criminal record attached. Along with a $250 fine, he was required to serve three days of community service, which he elected to do at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), a prominent New York City-based AIDS service organization (ASO).

"We were thrilled to have Alain here in the Meals Program as part of his community service," said Jeff Rindler, director of the organization's Volunteer, Work & Wellness Center. "GMHC relies on its volunteers to help prepare and serve over 400 meals each day to people living with HIV/AIDS. His warmth, enthusiasm and generosity were greatly appreciated."

Catching up with Robert on the morning of March 24, the second day of his sentence, one would hardly assume his volunteer work was court-ordered. Wearing an apron with his unruly blonde hair tucked beneath a black beanie, the stuntman was all smiles.

"This is great," said Robert, 46, as he filled salad bowls for GMHC clients. Robert admitted he did not know much about the organization before starting his work there—it was his attorney, Daniel Arshack,

who suggested serving the sentence there (Arshack has done volunteer legal work for the ASO during the past decade). Because Robert was arrested for raising global warming awareness, he was not allowed to work with an environmental organization.

“For me, it doesn’t matter. Whether it’s the environment or people living with HIV/AIDS, at least it’s doing something helpful,” Robert said.

Beginning his first ascents in 1975, Robert has been a climber for most of his life. He was drawn to climbing up the sides of buildings for the thrill of it, but found that it was also a bold way to get a message across to the crowds craning their necks upward from the streets below.

“Whenever I am climbing a building, it has an impact,” he said. “If I were just walking down the road, the impact would be zero.”

Robert’s chief cause these days is to draw attention to the hazards of greenhouse gas emissions, but he affirms that eliminating the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS should also be a top priority for world leaders and everyday people alike.

“If there’s one thing I would tell people [about HIV/AIDS] it’s to avoid discrimination,” Robert said. “We should treat people with HIV/AIDS as normally as possible.”

Does that fit on a banner?

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