Editor’s Letter

Enlightening the Populace

June 1, 2009 By Regan Hofmann

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently announced the launch of “Act Against AIDS,” a massive $45 million, multimedia, five-year AIDS awareness campaign. It comes on the heels of last year’s CDC announcement that the infection rate for HIV in the United States is 40 percent higher than previously reported. Despite the fact that AIDS is misperceived as manageable in the United States, there are more people living with HIV in America who are unaware of their status than ever before.

How did this happen? How are we seeing the same rates of new HIV infection (albeit, today, in the black and Latino communities) that we did in the beginning of the epidemic? Two words: AIDS fatigue. It’s not easy to keep people focused on any social cause decade after decade. Even the most aware and compassionate advocate can tire of fighting. But we must remain most vigilant about enemies, like AIDS, that refuse to die. And we need the media’s help.

That’s why this issue pays homage to two media icons who have tirelessly fought for AIDS awareness since the epidemic’s onset. Fashion designer Kenneth Cole uses his ad campaigns to keep HIV/AIDS in the limelight, and as chairman of the board of the Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), he also plays a critical role in ensuring that the funds keep coming to support the hunt for the cure. Rachel Maddow, who started her work as an AIDS activist in high school and who now hosts her eponymous show on MSNBC, similarly takes advantage of her prominence in the media to focus attention on HIV/AIDS.

One of my first media appearances after coming to *POZ* was on Maddow’s Air America radio show. She was well versed on all things AIDS-related and wasn’t looking to lambaste or exploit, but rather, to enlighten the populace. As pointed out in Maddow’s profile (Maddow About You), she is searingly smart, disarmingly funny and deeply compassionate. Three qualities that would serve a champion of any cause well. Incidentally, they are three qualities also embodied by Cole.

Last year, I appeared in a Kenneth Cole campaign as part of a group of individuals who had all faced some hurdle and lived in spite of it. To show my challenge, a tattoo that read “HIV-Positive” was airbrushed on my shoulder. I’d considered getting the tattoo for real when I was first diagnosed, to show that HIV can happen to anyone. At the time though, I didn’t have the courage to indelibly ink that message into my skin.

But the dearth of AIDS messaging in the media has me reconsidering that tattoo. Hey, maybe I could even go on Maddow's show and unveil it to the entire nation….

Imagine if each one of us living with HIV could feel secure enough that we wouldn't be stigmatized, discriminated against or criminalized, that we could wear our HIV status without fear on our sleeves. That would certainly enlighten the populace. Beyond AIDS fatigue, it is the invisible nature of HIV that helps keep the epidemic alive and kicking.

Until the day when more of us feel secure about stepping forward, thanks are due to Cole, Maddow and others, including the CDC, who use their powers to illuminate the fact that AIDS is still very much a reality in America.

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