Lady Bunny

Dominic is all ears when it comes to Playboy's Christie Hefner

January 1, 1998 By Dominic Hamilton-Little

It is easy to dismiss Playboy as a misogynist dinosaur. But before tossing the bunny out with the bathwater, it's worth listening to Christie Hefner, chairman and chief executive officer of Playboy Enterprises Inc. In her most recent role as chair of the CORE Foundation board, this one-woman dynamo raised $25 million to build the CORE Center in Chicago which, upon its completion in the fall of 1998, will be the nation's first freestanding, specialized outpatient facility for PWAs.

Dominic Hamilton-Little: Does Playboy have a particular responsibility regarding AIDS awareness?

Christie Hefner: Absolutely. We've been writing about AIDS since 1983, and the Playboy Foundation has long supported AIDS service organizations [ASOs]. Playboy is historically a credible and prominent source of information about sex. We've always been very pro-sex, but pro-responsible sex. We've walked a fine line, very successfully, in that Playboy resisted much of the media-induced hysteria – yet discussed the ramifications of unsafe sex. We've always felt that people shouldn't overreact but be informed.

I must confess to not reading Playboy, so I'm not sure who you appeal to.

We have a monthly circulation of 10 million, and it is the most popular magazine among college guys.

Have you ever had an openly HIV positive model?

Yes. Rebekka Armstrong is a Playmate who has dedicated herself to promoting AIDS awareness, most of all among women.

What direction do you think AIDS education should take?

We must acknowledge the tragic failure of our government to address AIDS in the early years. We lost time and people that will never be replaced.

Still, we have so far to go: There are no condom ads on TV, which is ludicrous. It should not be so hard for young people to access condoms. America has one of the highest rates of teen-age pregnancy in the world; just because we are not giving our kids condoms is not stopping them from having sex.

And needle exchange cannot be denied. So what if it is a political hot button? We have no excuse for not doing what is right.

What do you think of the recent surge of unsafe sex, namely barebacking?

This is alarming. I hope it's not a real trend and not representative of a major shift in behavior. On an emotional level, I understand it. I mean, if you had lived for the last 10 to 15 years under a quasi-death sentence, being told that human sexuality is off-limits and fatal, at a certain point you just rebel. And with the notion of a morning after pill and advances in HIV treatment, I am not surprised this is happening.

On a purely human level, it reminds me of the violence that came out of the Black Power movement. I may not have liked it, but I understood it. We cannot demonize sex just because there is no cure for AIDS. Not all forms of sexual activity carry equal risk, and AIDS educators must draw clearer distinctions between levels of risk. And, people in the community where this is happening need to talk to each other.

What is the CORE Center's mission?

To revolutionize health care for people with HIV and AIDS. It'll be a state-of-the-art clinic combining research, education and care in an outpatient setting. Anyone in the area – regardless of who their doctor is or whether they have insurance – will benefit from it. I like to think of it as the hub of a wheel in HIV treatment. By providing care, including alternative therapies like acupuncture and massage, the Center will hopefully become a model to be replicated.

Was it hard to raise $25 million?

Harder than I thought, but I've been gratified by how few people said no. I made a point not to go after money that would go to other ASOs, like Ryan White funding. I believe that in raising these funds we needed to raise awareness as well. I've gone to McDonald's, the Tribune Foundation and even Sears, and people did listen. Frankly, the notion of the Center is so compelling and relevant that it is difficult to say no to us.

I can see why. Your candor and passion are invigorating.

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