# Cut, Print, It’s a Wrap!

New film about the origins of the safe-sex movement

April 1, 2009 By James Wortman

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It’s hard to imagine a time when safer sex wasn’t at the center of conversations about HIV in this country. But in 1983, when Richard Berkowitz, Michael Callen and Joseph Sonnabend, MD, wrote *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic*, advocating condom use and low-risk sexual activity, many were outraged. The 40-page pamphlet linked the frighteningly new and then-deadly virus to sexual promiscuity among gay men, which in turn caused Berkowitz and his colleagues to be labeled as “sex negative” and “self-hating.” As a result, they were shut out from the very community they were trying to protect.

“We got off on the wrong foot, and it really hurt us,” Berkowitz, 53, recently told *POZ*.

*Sex Positive* (Regent Releasing), a new documentary that chronicles these times, showcases how safe sex morphed from a controversial wake-up call into the current public health cornerstone. Inspired by his 2003 memoir, *Stayin’ Alive: The Invention of Safe Sex* (Basin Books), the film also highlights Berkowitz’s evolution from an S/M sex worker to a controversial AIDS activist.

“The great thing about *Sex Positive* is that it puts that early history into perspective,” says Berkowitz, who was diagnosed with HIV in the early ’80s.

“People come away understanding that this was an overwhelming time and it was a difficult, radical and overnight change that we were asking people to make.”

The film, which will hit theaters later this year, has been well received so far. “I think it’s resonating with young people, who are just absolutely shocked that they’ve never heard these things before,” he says.

In light of the CDC’s revelation that new HIV infections are 40 percent higher than previously estimated, Berkowitz hopes that this film sparks new conversations among two groups heavily affected by the epidemic today: gay men and straight women.

“In a country that’s highly homophobic and highly misogynist, I always hoped that sexually active women and gay men would see a common ground,” Berkowitz says. “We need to find ways within ourselves to celebrate receptive sex, care enough about ourselves to demand that our partners

protect us and work together to create a better climate to negotiate safer sex.”

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