Neither snow, nor rain...

February 12, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

“Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these courageous couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds...” So said the Greek historian, Herodotus nearly 2,500 years ago. He coined the adage during the war between the Greeks and Persians about 500 B.C. in reference to the Persian mounted postal couriers whom he held in high esteem.

It is an adage that could be applied to this year’s amfAR gala, held last Wednesday night.

On that night, the snow was as white as the paint on Lady Gaga’s body...and the pearls on her face...

As the blizzard slashed sideways through Manhattan, die hard supporters of amfAR (the Foundation for AIDS Research) donned their Kenneth Cole rubbers--boots, that is--and made their way to Cipriani in midtown Manhattan. AmfAR raises money to aggressively search for the cure for AIDS; it does great policy work on Capitol Hill (amfAR was instrumental in getting legislation approved around non-restricted needle exchange, among other things); it supports MSM prevention and runs programs like “Treat Asia”--an amazing endeavor based in Bangkok that you’ll read more about soon on the pages of POZ!. I have recently joined amfAR’s board of trustees.

A quick aside: If you don’t already have a pair of Kenneth’s rubber boots, get some. Someday (though not soon, thanks to Punxatawny Phil and that damn shadows of his...) the snow drifts are going to melt and you will need them! I am shamelessly hawking them because they are super cool (they look like vintage motorcycle boots) and are impervious to the elements. Trust this girl who’s test driven nearly every form of Wellington and knock-off known to man, Kenneth’s boots are the only ones that can go straight from slush-strewn streets to ballrooms bursting with celebrities without having to be coat checked (though I did remove mine in favor of six-inch silver platform stilettos). And the sale of the boots benefits amfAR’s great work.

The amfAR gala kicked off opening night of Fashion Week in NYC and raised more than a million for the fight against AIDS. The fact that the annual event is always crawling with A-list celebs (this year: Alan Cumming, Alexandre Kerry, Anna Wintour, Brooke Shields, Carol Alt, Charity, Cheyenne Jackson, Chloe Sevigny, Christian Sirano, Cyndi Lauper, Cynthia Nixon, Donna Karan, Doutzen Kroes, Eliza Dushku, Heidi Klum, Iman, James Gandolfini, Jay Alexander, Joely Richardson, Julia Stiles, Julianna Margulies, karolina Korkova, Keith Lieberthal, Kenneth Cole, Lady Gaga, Leigh Lazark, Maggie Riser, Margherita Missoni, Meryl Streep, Michael Kors, Nigel Barker, Paulina

Porizkova, Ric Ocasek, Rick Fox, Rufus Wainwright, Sarah Ferguson (The Duchess of York), Sigourney Weaver, Stanley Tucci, Vanessa Redgrave and Zoe Saldana, to name a few…) helps refocus attention on the issue.

There's always debate about whether celebrities help a cause more than helping the cause helps the celebrity but I always say, "Does it really matter why someone is doing something if the outcome is beneficial?" That said, many of the celebrities who lend their support to amfAR are knowledgeable about the issue and have been long time supporters of both the cause and the organization. Some of their lives have been touched closely by the issue.

One of the most dedicated, and personally affected, of amfAR's celebrity supporters was Natasha Richardson, who tragically passed away last year. She lost her father to the disease and was a relentless warrioress. This year's amfAR event was extra special as it included a tribute to Natasha given by her mother, Vanessa Redgrave and Natasha's friend, Meryl Streep. I had the privilege of watching Natasha speak eloquently at last year's benefit and have always been inspired by her incredible dedication to raising awareness and money for the fight against AIDS, her grace and her commitment. Her loss is profoundly felt.

And so, after host actor Stanley Tucci, amfAR's Chairman of the Board Kenneth Cole, Rufus Wainwright, Cyndi Lauper, John Demsey (who oversees Estee Lauder and MAC), Yves Carcelle (CEO of Louis Vuitton, and one of the evening's honorees; the other was the ever-amazing AIDS hero Elton John who unfortunately for us was performing in Vegas), Glenda Bailey (of Harper's Bazaar magazine), Ingrid Sischy (formerly of Interview magazine, now of Vanity Fair abroad…), Dr. Mathilde Krim (amfAR's founding chairman) and Lady Gaga took the stage (more on Gaga to come…), it was time for Vanessa to pay homage to her daughter.

As a daughter who has nearly died and who has had conversations with my mother about my once-seemingly-imminent death, I was stunned by Vanessa's strength. I can only imagine how difficult it was for her to speak of her loss so publicly. I marveled at her Superwoman-like power as she stood facing the crowd of more than 740 people standing in ovation for Natasha. She did not leave the stage, but stayed, bravely drinking in the appreciation pouring forth. Then, Meryl Streep toasted Natasha by singing an old Irish song. I was already on the verge of tears, but as soon as I recognized the song, tears flooded my face.

It was a song I had chosen to have played at my own funeral, when, thirteen years ago, I was trying to deal with what I thought was impending death by planning for a graceful demise. There was something empowering about facing my fears of death and planning a party around my funeral--even if I would only be able to attend in spirit. Making a guest list, and selecting music, as macabre as that may sound, was a way for me to embrace the inevitable and try as best I could to make it pleasant for those I would leave behind. I wanted there to be song and dance and drink and celebration.

As I sat in my chair on Wednesday night, mourning the loss of a great woman I never had the good fortune to meet, I hoped that things are such that Natasha could experience the love in that room.

I hoped she could know the gratitude I feel for her work--a gratitude I also feel for amfAR's work and for the work of all people around the world who have done so much to develop life saving treatment for those of us living with HIV.

Natasha Richardson not only touched my life, she literally helped save it. Were it not for her efforts, they very well may have sung that same Irish song for me, too.

While no one will replace her, we are lucky to have others who have also championed the cause with massive impact. Elton John, as everyone knows, has done such amazing things for people with HIV all over the world. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to be at the event and David Furnish, his partner, was ill. But we saw an amazing video of Elton's lifelong commitment to the fight against AIDS and Lady Gaga accepted the award on his behalf.

It was announced on Wednesday that Lady Gaga and Cyndi Lauper are the new MAC AIDS spokeswomen. Gaga--an exploding star with talent worthy of Carnegie Hall--is a great choice for a new voice on AIDS. Though just 24, she commands attention in a way few people twice her age can. And of course, we love Cyndi.

As I left the benefit (cream puffs, umbrella and the train of my dress in hand) and headed out into the snowy night, the sadness I had felt about Natasha lifted a little. I imagined her watching and hoped that she could see the next generation of warriors--and warrioresses--come to fight the fight she waged with such grace and courage. It is with her spirit in mind that we will fight on, through the snow, the rain and whatever else heaven sends our way.

Here are some video highlights from the night:

And some photos. For more photos, please go to my Facebook page!

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