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ATTORNEYS AT LAW

Views: Yes, She Is

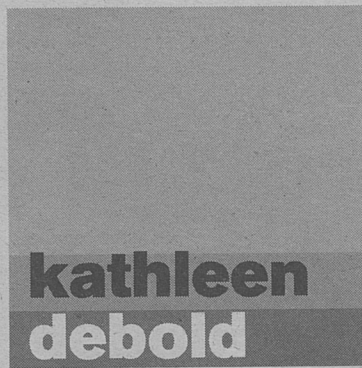
The phone was ringing when I walked into my house. I had barely said “Hello” when the voice started screaming. “Oh my God! Oh my God! Are you watching this?” “Watching what?” “The T.V.!! Oh my God, don’t you have it on?”

Visions of 9/11 exploded in my head as I scrambled for the remote. “Hurry up, hurry up,” the voice implored, “Channel 9!” My fumbling fingers punched in the number. And there was Melissa Etheridge, bald, beautiful, and singing the hell out of Janis Joplin’s “Piece of My Heart.”

Despite my best efforts to butch it out, my eyes filled up as the rock icon shared her vulnerability and strength with all lesbians who, like her, are living with cancer. But these weren’t just tears of joy for one woman’s selfless act. The day before I had been to a memorial service for yet another dear friend who died from cancer. I cried for her and her partner of 25 years — and for all those we have lost to this devastating disease.

Melissa Etheridge’s appearance at the 2005 Grammys was a revolutionary moment in lesbian health. In the flash of a paparazzo’s camera, Melissa and her partner, Tammy Lynn Michaels, accomplished what lesbian health activists have been trying to do for decades: Get the mainstream media to say the words “lesbian” and “cancer” in the same sentence, and get lesbians to focus on an issue of tremendous importance to their own health and well being.

What little research there is shows that lesbians may be at



higher risk for certain types of cancer. Lesbians also face serious barriers to receiving cancer screening and care because of real and perceived discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender expression. These barriers include less access to health insurance (lesbians

Since the Grammys, my e-mail has been filled with messages from women for whom, as one wrote, “Melissa just opened a huge closet door in my life.” The comments range from deeply poignant (“I just wish Linda could have been here to see it with me. She loved Melissa so much”) to fiercely empowered (“I’m not wearing my wig to work today — Bald is beautiful!”) Even more wonderful was the number of calls and emails asking for information about cancer. Asking for referrals to lesbian-friendly doctors. Asking how they could help lesbians with cancer. All because Melissa Etheridge had the courage to say, “Yes, I am.” Yes, she is a lesbian. And, yes, she is a lesbian with cancer.

What words can describe someone who has impacted lesbian

In the flash of a paparazzo’s camera, Melissa got the mainstream media to say the words “lesbian” and “cancer” in the same sentence.

can’t get married and very few workplaces offer domestic partnership benefits), lack of lesbian-focused health education programs, and heterosexism/homophobia among health care providers and their staffs. As a result, lesbians often don’t get diagnosed until their cancer is more advanced. Melissa Etheridge is helping to change all that.

health as much as Melissa has? Hero? Role model? Inspiration? Yes, she is. ▼

Kathleen DeBold is the Executive Director of the Mautner Project, the national lesbian health organization (www.mautner.org).

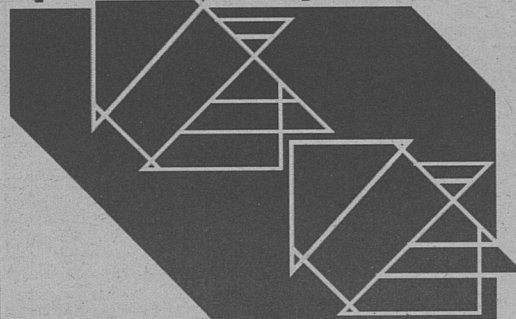
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April's Home Improvement

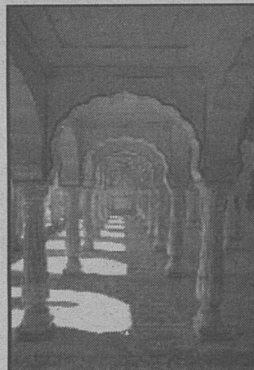
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