

AIDS is a lesbian issue

by Gwen Shervington

As of the summer of 1984, 340 women in the U.S. between the ages of 20-40 had AIDS. Of this total, 50% were black, 24% white, 23% hispanic and 3% other. Over half of these women were I.V. drug users and over one-third were "other" which includes women who had received blood transfusion and women who had sexual relations with men in the high risk groups. People who are in high risk groups for AIDS are I.V. drug users, sexual partners of people at high risk, and blood transfusion recipients.

Lesbians who aren't I.V. drug users appear to be at the lowest risk of contracting AIDS, but this has not prevented us from being victims of the homophobic backlash associated with the disease. Lesbians are included in the legislation designed to limit the sexual freedom of gay men because we too are considered perverts. The loss of sexual freedom is a lesbian issue.

Today about 7% of the U.S. cases and 50% of the non-U.S. cases are women. While women at AIDS conferences do get together to talk about women and AIDS, minimal organizing is done around the needs of our sisters exposed to the disease. Why? One reason is burnout from other work. Another reason is that people generally don't respond to the urgency of AIDS until someone they know gets it. Women with AIDS are scattered across the country and not necessarily associated with the lesbian community. Therefore not many radically active lesbians know women with AIDS.

Nonetheless, women with AIDS is a lesbian issue, and as long as women sleep with women, AIDS will remain a lesbian and bisexual women's issue.

The right wing lumps women (ERA) and lesbians/gays in the same bundle. There is a dangerous prejudice against all groups that go against the traditional family model. The Reagan Administration is systematically eliminating laws which prohibit discrimination and destroying the right to

privacy sexually, including abortion. The refusal of this Administration to disseminate non-judgmental information on safe sex and safe I.V. needle use is of concern to us all.

AIDS touches on the issues that lesbians have been concerned with for years: education about our bodies and the right to make choices for which we are not penalized. It's time for us to put AIDS on our agendas. AIDS is a lesbian issue.

From all walks of life

A View of "From All Walks of Line" in Boston on June 1

Richard Cornwall

They looked up startled from their Sunday papers. It wasn't that they did not expect foot and bike and dog traffic in profusion on the asphalt path on the levee in the Charles River. As they lay on the green flanks of the levee developing their seductively curved tan-lines, they liked looking and being looked at. Yet the spectacle of 4,000 massed walkers parading behind a mildly activist banner carried by two chunky hunks was startling, perhaps exposing, and that is what this walk was all about.

We assembled near the anemic statue between the two exists from the parking garage on the Boston Common. There is something ritualistic about speeches at rallies like this. Mayor Raymond Flynn and Governor Michael Dukakis recognized this by being pleasantly brief in their support. Dukakis also had the incentive to shorten the exposure of the omnipresent TV cameras to the well disciplined chorus of chanters of "Foster equality" which accompanied this talk. Rep. Gerry Studs gave a good, solid talk, but the hits were John Pascarrelli, who has AIDS, and Paula Martin, the mother of Jimmy McIntyre who died of AIDS a month earlier. They evoked our core feelings about the risks to our loving we all face because of AIDS.

"From All Walks of Life" was well organized. From the crossing guards at every intersection (I haven't felt that wonderful double sense of protection and power crossing a busy street since going to elementary school) to the fruit stops with water in hundreds of Dixie cups arrayed on tables, with heaping boxes of orange slices, with bands (as in Souza) playing and, on the Cambridge side of the River, with a dark, brown-haired boy in bountiful black running shorts with a wonderful grin. Most impressive was the organizational work which had to have been done to create the coalition of diverse people from all walks. At least fifty percent were women and large numbers of nongay and nonlesbian people were there (it did not even spoil the cruising). Walking with my straight sister and her woman friend

from Sterling Institute and comparing notes on who was cute was the most simple kind of community building.

This walk was the most tangible evidence I have yet seen of Cindy Patton's assertion (in her excellent book *Sex and Germs, the Politics of AIDS* by Southend Press in Boston) that "AIDS organizing promises to exert a major influence on the lesbian and gay community for years. ...A 'post-AIDS' sensibility will emerge with a special emotional quality and political commitment much as a 'post-Stonewall' ethos resonates in lesbian and gay organizing after 1969." We, as a community, are successfully overcoming homophobia and erotophobia ("if gay men had conducted themselves differently, AIDS would never have happened"). Gay men now have more in common with women in dealing with the medical establishment. We both have clearly articulated goals in working with the doctors and scientists who run our institutions for disease control and, as Michel Foucault (French student of, among other topics, ideology, prisons, and sexuality) has remarked, in our age it is primarily scientists who shape our society's ideology. From abortion rights to AIDS to sex education and to spirituality, lesbians and gay men are playing the leading role in redefining our society's perspective on the vocabulary about love and sexuality. The AIDS walk in Boston netted over \$350,000 for groups ranging from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross AIDS Baby Hospice and the New England Hemophilia Association as well as several AIDS helping groups. But more importantly, it also probably brought some of those startled sunbathers on the levee one step closer to using organization and education than Lysol to fight germs.

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