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On the Film *Sex in An Epidemic*

By Ashley Villarreal, TDN Local Health Reporter

When Jean Carlomusto started her career in AIDS advocacy she was up against an invisible force. It was the mid-80s and the disease had just been “discovered” by America. Many dealt with this shocking news, which almost single-handedly focused on the gay population, with defiance. There was no way that the U.S. was going to condone, or ultimately, pay for such behavior.

In 1988, Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina was the voice of the public when he submitted an amendment to prohibit the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) from making funds available for AIDS education. Racy videos, sexual comics, and sexual conduct were the culprits of the decline of society, and with a strong conservative backing, Helms successfully helped turn the country against the fight for AIDS.

At this time, Carlomusto was just as active speaking out for the disease as Helms was speaking against it. Joining on as part of ACT UP, an organization described by one city’s newscaster as being “known for disruptive protest designed to draw attention to the spread of AIDS,” (at one point wrapping Helms’ entire home in a makeshift condom) Carlomusto began to work on campaigns to dampen the spread of HIV. It seemed the best way to do this would be to lead a discussion towards understanding what sex is about and being able to talk openly about what it shouldn’t be.

To Carlomusto, this meant signing onto sex-oriented advertisements like the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) “Safer Sex Comix” as a way to reach out to broader audiences that might be turned off by an abstinence-only discussion.

Almost 25 years later, Carlomusto has put together a fledgling film, *Sex in An Epidemic*, a way to look back on the progress we’ve made in the fight for safe sex. The documentary follows several interviewees diagnosed with AIDS, chronicling the rise of AIDS in America among the gay population, the backlash from mainly religious and conservative institutions, and the struggle the gay population had in trying to define the limits of protected sex. It seemed the general consensus of the era, which followed a seamless decade of “free love” and guilt-free encounters, was that safe sex was going to have to be invented not enforced. From this argument, two sides formed – one which rallied to develop an adequate response to the implementation of safer practices, and the other which chose to ignore the concern and psychologically minimize the cost by waiting to let science decide.

Nowadays, being gay does not automatically mean you have AIDS. Homosexual characters now play major roles in our popular culture, and celebrity stars are even applauded for “coming out” on national television. In many ways, we have changed the way we perceive “the gay disease.” Yet, the battle over how to prepare ourselves and our children for the argument of safe sex still remains one of the greatest challenges.

The most harrowing takeaway point from Carlomusto’s film is that we may have come along way since 1985, but we still have much farther to go. In analyzing the battle to appropriately assign blame to one group or another (in this case the gay population at the rise of the disease) and later on to African Americans during its progression, we have ignored the real issue at hand: America has a problem with sex.

Today, the CDC is a major source of funding for AIDS research and advocacy, and although its funding goes mostly to pro-abstinence education, overall, people support condom and contraception education. In 2004, a study by the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and the Kaiser Health Foundation showed more than half of parents and educators believed in what was called “abstinence-plus” education. Only 15 percent said they supported an abstinence-only curriculum. Yet, when educators were surveyed on whether or not they teach abstinence-only in schools, 30 percent of principals at public schools reported doing so.

Just last week, a public school in Montana publicized its goal to begin teaching sexual education in kindergarten. Protests erupted nationwide as adults and parents stood up against what they considered dangerous, not simply because of a curriculum open to the idea of sex, but one that teaches kids about anal sex and sex with objects to five-year-olds. Despite a lack of popular opinion from a clinical or scientific field, the message is clear: we don’t want to teach the next generation that being gay and having gay sex is okay.

There has been a lot of discussion recently that expands the focus of HIV prevention. It’s not just the gay population anymore. This past month, President Barack Obama stated that his Global Health Initiative for AIDS would focus mainly on black men in America. Press conferences held by pop stars such as Lady Gaga have focused on the lack of communication for increasing rates of infection of women with HIV. Even here at Transdiaspora Network reported a 2008 statistic from the CDC showing that rates of HIV infection were on the rise in children, and 1 out of 9 HIV infections were happening right here in the New York Metropolitan area.

Although this goes a long way to being more proactive about how we target the disease, perhaps the message of the film is not just that we shouldn’t forget about the gay community as a subset of society that still lacks a solution, but that we should analyze the history of how we have come to define safe sex. The film

discusses defining what this means, going beyond the concept of condom-use to bring in ideas of real human bonds of trust and love as weapons for safe sex, while discounting the idea that AIDS just arises out of promiscuity. The real fight against AIDS may lie not within overcoming our sexual differences, but in the questions still left unanswered: why isn't talking about sex more welcome in our society? Why has the struggle for sex education been so convoluted? And lastly, what does it mean to feel safe while having sex anyway?

The documentary *Sex in An Epidemic* is still touring the film festival circuit and is expected to be available for purchase sometime later this year. For rental, please send inquiries to info@outcast-films.com.