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TELEVISION

# TELEVISION; IN SAN FRANCISCO, TV BATTLES ON THE FRONT LINES AGAINST AIDS

By MARY ANN HOGAN; Mary Ann Hogan is an Oakland, Calif., writer who frequently reports on AIDS issues. Published: February 21, 1988

**SAN FRANCISCO**— Early in 1983, Jim Bunn, a new reporter for KPIX-TV here, finished writing his first AIDS report and knew the story was like none before. It had sex, death, medical intrigue, a host of complex social issues - not the least of which were civil rights and gay life styles - and, by definition, it was going to challenge every taboo known to television.

But most of all, Mr. Bunn recalls, television wasn't just reporting the story. It was soon to become part of the story and potentially part of the solution to an epidemic that has hit 52,000 Americans, 29,000 of whom have already died, and has possibly infected as many as one million more.

"The story was something that transcended our role as journalists," Mr. Bunn said recently. "As broadcasters, we were in the business of providing information. We were in a position to help stop the spread of the disease."

Initially, not everyone in the Bay Area broadcasting community shared Mr. Bunn's sense of mission. AIDS was a story, certainly, but not necessarily one to be championed. It only affected gays, really, a newsworthy subject sometimes, but not day in and day out, on the 6 o'clock news, even in San Francisco.

But Mr. Bunn's view has prevailed. He soon became the nation's first full-time television AIDS reporter, traveling around the globe for KPIX, a CBS affiliate. And now the programming he helped set in motion is going national. "AIDS Lifeline," an education and public-service campaign developed at KPIX, is being syndicated by the station's parent company, Group W Television [ see box ]. WPIX-TV in New York plans to carry the first of the hourlong shows on Monday, March 7 with the presentation of "AIDS 101," a prime-time primer, the first of five specials to be broadcast this year.

Television has become part of a pioneering public-education effort in San Francisco, a city of 740,000, where time has been compressed because of urgency, where the 4,100 AIDS cases - and the 20,000 more that are expected to develop within five years - represent the highest number of cases per capita in the Western hemisphere. One station was the first in the nation to broadcast condom commercials. Another was the first to demonstrate the proper use of a condom and to make safe-sex specifics part of its regular broadcast lexicon.

But most important, stations here have struck a comfortable partnership with health and education organizations throughout the community, on a scale local broadcasters say is unprecedented in television. Although the print media covered the story earlier, more

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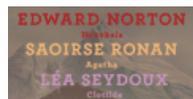
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accurately and more aggressively, television, because of its sheer pervasiveness, is generally credited with waging the most powerful educational campaign.

The journey that San Francisco television made in its AIDS coverage went through four stages. First, there was resistance. Next, there was coverage of the story, but overall it was spotty, sensational or off the mark in the choice of what was important and what was not. A third stage found the story being covered accurately, with the scientific information correct, and the science and the sociology in balance. But that, in turn, led to a final stage: the realization that simply covering the story was only a beginning.

"AIDS didn't change the role of news coverage," said Bruno Cohen, formerly KPIX's news director and now a film producer with the Disney studio. "What it did was create a lot of discussion about the role of a television station in a medical epidemic."

KPIX broadcast its first AIDS special, a four-part series, in 1983. In May 1985, Larry Lee, a field producer for KRON-TV, produced a special that was subsequently syndicated worldwide, "In the Midst of Life," focusing on the AIDS ward at San Francisco General Hospital. "We made a conscious decision to distance the audience by having a straight woman [ the head nurse on the ward ] as the main subject," said Mr. Lee, who is gay. "We thought, if people aren't going to pay attention to this disease because of fags and junkies, we'd put it in terms they could understand."

Another KPIX special was broadcast soon after, in August 1985, and took an educational slant. The hourlong production, called "Our Worst Fears," focused on how education can help stem the spread of the disease as well as lessen the fear surrounding it. The station's "AIDS Lifeline" public-service and education campaign, more than a year in the making, began at the same time, just as the world first learned that the actor Rock Hudson had the fatal illness and the story, for a time, became a national obsession.

From the start, the AIDS education and care groups - "the people in the trenches," as one of them says - have met with station officials to stress the importance of education. The groups, broadcasters will tell you, have acted as guides. "We didn't have to go out there all alone," says Nancy Saslow, a former KPIX producer.

Holly Smith, of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, the area's primary clearinghouse for AIDS information, is known locally as the media watchdog. Ms. Smith herself says, "The biggest turning point for me was when the media and the community organizations said, 'O.K., we're in this together, and we're in it for the long haul.'"

Mr. Lee of KRON-TV, the area's NBC affiliate, which last year drew national attention for its decision to broadcast condom commercials, says: "We wanted to elicit a sense of compassion. It's more than a particular news report or special - it's a willingness to cover it day in, day out."

At a recent exhibit of an AIDS memorial quilt here, sponsored by KPIX-TV, some felt that sense of compassion had fully flowered. Visitors to the exhibit left with pamphlets, paid for and produced by the TV station, listing AIDS care and service groups around the Bay Area. An hourlong KPIX telecast about the quilt, "Threads of Love," drew another 30,000 requests for the pamphlets. The result was the largest single volunteer recruitment effort in the history of the epidemic here.

"It's the traditional American response to a disaster, people pulling together," says Greg Day, the community-education director for San Francisco's Shanti Project, the country's largest AIDS volunteer care organization. "Television played a key role in making that happen."

Today in San Francisco, it is not uncommon to see AIDS prevention placards on buses, brought to you by the same people who bring you the nightly news. Education pamphlets and service organization guides, printed in various languages, bear the names of TV

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stations as well as the numbers of AIDS hotlines.

For the most part, reporters on the story have become AIDS specialists, like Mr. Bunn and his colleague at KPIX, Hank Plante, who spends at least 80 percent of his office time on AIDS stories and one workday a week reading up on the science of it. Mr. Plante recently broke six AIDS-related stories in the course of one week, all of them picked up by the networks, local print media or national wire services.

The city of San Francisco is small, its social fabric closely knit. The gay community, representing one-quarter of the electorate, is organized, political, visible and well connected. For television, that has meant a tough critic, as well as - eventually - a strong ally.

The environment here has been emotionally charged, so much so that the public-health chief, on the brink of closing the city's gay bathhouses in 1984, jogged each morning wearing a bullet-proof vest. But that environment was one the majority of television viewers didn't know about and didn't understand.

Mr. Bunn, speaking by telephone from his office in Geneva, where he is on loan to the World Health Organization, helping develop an AIDS education plan for the international media, says: "The staff fights I remember most were when someone would say, 'How are we going to make this story meaningful to Joe Beerbelly out in Martinez?' A real signpost for us as a station came when we said, 'O.K., I guess we're not going to find any heterosexual suburbanites with AIDS. Let's do the story anyway.' "

In effect, television grew up here as the audience it reached grew more tolerant, the one maybe helping to make the way for the other.

"We had discussions about every phrase - about how we could do this so the majority of people wouldn't turn off their TV," recalls the producer Ms. Saslow. Indeed, early on, all the stations in town rejected a series of public-service announcements produced by the San Francisco AIDS Foundation. The spots were considered either too sexually suggestive, or - in the case of one, showing a man with the disfiguring lesions of Kaposi's sarcoma - too shocking.

Community groups, in particular the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, actively lobbied stations to include in their reports repeated, detailed descriptions of how the virus is spread, to whom and why, rather than relying on euphemisms, such as "exchange of bodily fluids." Reporters and producers, in turn, lobbied station executives to do away with TV's traditional prudery and to say outright, when appropriate, that the virus is spread during unprotected sex between men and women and unprotected anal intercourse between men.

Doing the story did not preclude early lapses into the sensational. In 1984, television's coverage of the city's divisive bathhouse controversy "glossed over the intricacies of a complex social dynamic," Mr. Bunn says. "It was a case where TV really didn't serve very well."

"What we learned from San Francisco was the urgency," says Jeanne Blake, medical reporter and AIDS specialist at WBZ-TV in Boston, which started an AIDS education campaign soon after KPIX syndicated "Our Worst Fears" in 1985.

In the summer of 1987, scores of mini-documentaries, newscasts and public-service announcements later, KPIX was awarded a national Emmy for its AIDS programming. The AIDS staff won a Peabody Award as well. Though other stations have not shied away from AIDS coverage, there is a feeling around town that KPIX has put its stamp on the issue. Sometimes sources call with tips, saying, 'I know you guys are the AIDS station.' "

A staff member at a competing station puts it this way: "They richly deserve their Peabody. It breaks my heart that we weren't able to somehow work together to carve out different

parts of the story. But they're doing it. It's being done. So, what's the difference?"

## BRANCHING OUT

"AIDS Lifeline," an education and public-service campaign developed by KPIX-TV in San Francisco and nationally syndicated by Group W Television, is being called the largest AIDS public-education effort to date on commercial television.

Since late last month, viewers in a number of other cities, including Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Pittsburgh, have had a sampling of the weekly news updates on AIDS issues and the frank 10- and 30-second public-service announcements - some of them advocating condom use - featuring celebrities such as Jimmy Smith, Marlee Matlin, Ted Danson and Quincy Jones.

The package includes a series of five one-hour specials for broadcast this year - the first one, "AIDS 101," to be shown early next month - on topics such as heterosexuals and AIDS, particular problems within minority communities, how to explain the disease to children and testing and treatment.

But most important, "AIDS Lifeline" urges local stations to take an activist role in their communities by helping to set up local resource networks and panels of consultants, and by generating outreach ideas; they are also encouraged to produce and circulate information pamphlets, and to distribute educational videotapes designed for parents and their children to schools, libraries or parent-teacher associations.

The campaign has already been bought by stations in markets as diverse as Los Angeles; Nashville; Honolulu; Providence, R.I.; Waco, Tex.; Charlotte, N.C.; Atlanta; Miami, and Bakersfield, Calif. Group W hopes to eventually reach at least 100 cities by the end of the year.

Metropolitan Life Insurance has underwritten the project for \$1 million. Revenue from syndication sales - expected to be at least \$1 million this year - will go directly to AIDS organizations.

Photo of Hank Plante interviewing Bob Barnett, a San Franciscian diagnosed with AIDS, for KPIX's syndicated "AIDS Lifeline" series (Bob Adler)

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