

S.F.'s AIDS/ARC vigil continues

by Billy Russo

While the nation is busy being outraged by recent LaRoucheian primary victories in Illinois, the California chapter of this neo-Nazi group is quietly collecting signatures to put a measure before the California voters that dwarfs the Briggs initiative of the Seventies in terms of blatant homophobia. The LaRouche initiative calls for quarantine and other oppressive measures against PWAs and members of high-risk groups suspected of being AIDS carriers.

Legal consequences, according to the Orange County Chapter of the ACLU, include lifting the safeguards of confidentiality regarding the HTLV-III antibody test, barring suspected antibody carriers and members of their households from working or attending school, travel restrictions, forced isolation and quarantine.

Like during the campaign against the Briggs initiative (which proposed to bar all homosexuals from teaching in California), the lesbian/gay community will rise to battle this attack on human rights. Unlike during the Briggs campaign, the homophile community is also leading the fight against the ARC/AIDS epidemic. And there are other storms brewing in the California legislature affecting human rights regarding AIDS.

It's obvious that the epidemic has to be fought in the political as well as the scientific/medical arena. And it's also obvious that Roseburg should play a role. Both Portland and Eugene have good programs for caring for PWAs and PWARCs. And education is being orchestrated nationally. So, those of us

who are willing to play a role in Roseburg are focusing on the political issues. And a recent visit to the Bay Area removed all doubts in my mind that that is where we can be most effective.

In the past year I have heard inspiring stories from people passing through Roseburg about how effectively the Bay Area community is dealing with AIDS. I have heard a lot about an illegal ongoing demonstration



The Roseburg Report

called the ARC/AIDS Vigil. It is a small tent city in front of the old Federal Office Building which houses offices of Health and Human Services, the bureaucracy of which the Center for Disease Control is part. Besides an information table protected by an awning, there is a cook tent, one for supplies, and three tents which are used primarily to house homeless persons with ARC/AIDS. The table is staffed around the clock.

The Vigil is an act of civil disobedience that began last October when a handful of individuals decided to spend the night in protest of government response to the plight of persons with ARC/AIDS. Although illegal, the Vigil has been sanctioned by many powerful politicians and prospers under the protection of the city's board of supervisors.

When I arrived in early April there was much internal strife and infighting. This grassroots movement had suffered its first round of growing pains and was rebuilding after many key supporters walked away. It reminded me of what Roseburg's Gay And Lesbian Alliance (GALA) went through in 1982.

Also like Roseburg's GALA some disillusioned staffers took steps to destroy the Vigil from within. One pair of founding PWARCs repeatedly charged other unnamed members of dealing and doing drugs at the vigil site. This pair paid rare infrequent visits to the vigil site during the three weeks I participated. Yet every time they ventured over from the bar across the street, they brought accusations of substance abuse. Often their unsubstantiated charges led to loud non-constructive arguments. To dismiss these unfounded charges the core group spent many hours inspecting the tents and their contents. No drugs or paraphernalia was discovered during these searches. And although I spent six to eight hours there each day, I never saw any signs of illegal drugs.

In spite of internal problems the Vigil Family serves as the apex of political action around ARC/AIDS. With the support of Concerned Republicans for Individual Rights (CRIR), Vigil members frequently travel to Sacramento to testify at committee hearings on the dozens of AIDS bills before the California legislature. And according to them CRIR and the ACLU are the only groups do-

ing this important work at the state capitol. Most of the bills before the legislature are designed by arch-homophobes with the intent of diverting much-needed funds away from research, treatment and education. The bills focus on funneling funds into surveillance: needless mandatory antibody testing of groups like newlyweds, all hospitalized people, persons on kidney dialysis machines, the developmentally handicapped, etc. . . .

According to Jan Beck, a PWA active with both the Vigil and CRIR, if these homophobic bills are enacted into law, 80% of funds available will be used for surveillance.

On a parallel front the state health officer has come up with a program which similarly focuses on surveillance. In a long-overdue report, which is supported by the governor of California, guidelines are recommended which call for mandatory testing of rapists, the criminally insane, the mentally ill and possibly the CDC's "high risk groups."

The Vigil functions as an act of civil disobedience drawing attention to needed legislation. It draws attention to the issues with a petition outlining four moral appeals.

"We make these appeals to the President and the American people:

1. Federal research funding of \$500,000,000 this year to find a cure for AIDS & ARC, not to come from existing social programs. This amounts to one hour of government spending.
2. Federal recognition of AIDS-Related Complex (ARC) as a critical dimension of the AIDS crisis affecting vast numbers of Americans. We call for proper funding for medical care and support for people with ARC, including such services as Medicare and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).
3. The FDA must immediately allow American physicians to prescribe medicines and treatments for AIDS & ARC available to their colleagues in other countries.
4. We appeal to President Reagan and government officials at all levels to publicly condemn AIDS-related discrimination against current risk groups and to repudiate incitement of fear and hatred which exploits this tragic epidemic."

The Vigil site is at the main entrance to the Federal Building at 50 U.N. Plaza. Offices of Health and Human Services (HHS), the federal agency which administers the AIDS epidemic, are housed here. U.N. Plaza is bordered by San Francisco's main artery, Market Street.

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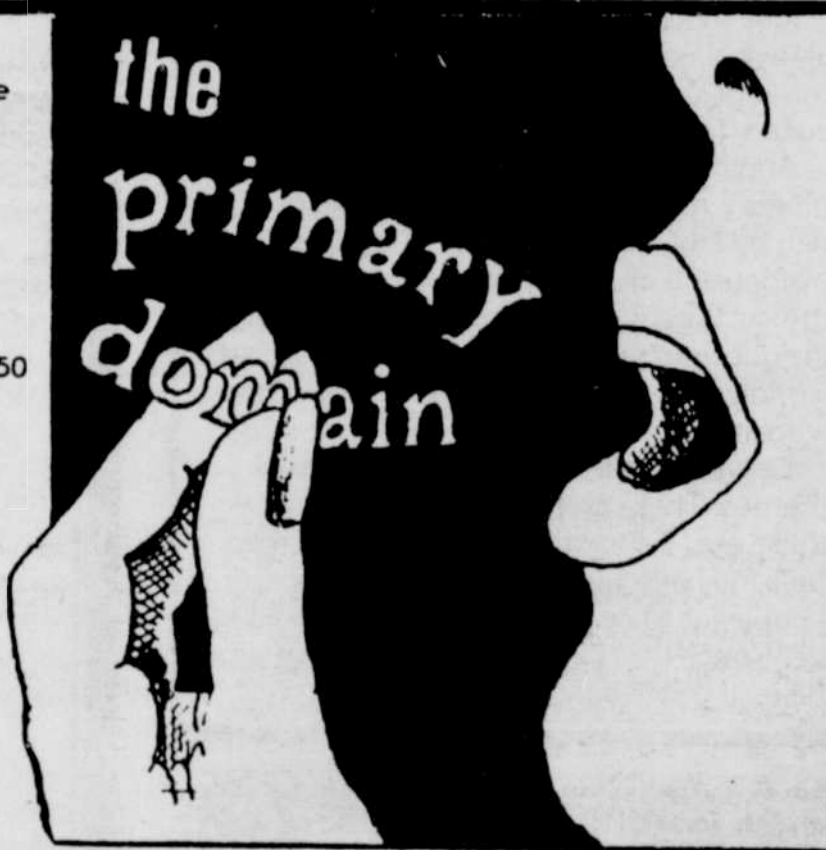


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