Mary Li, AIDS educator

Mary Li knows that silence about the "tiger" of AIDS equals death. She is determined to break the equation.

B Y A N D E E H O C H M A N

Bright posters quilt the walls of Mary Li's office, headquarters of the Oregon Minority AIDS Coalition (OMAC). Some of the posters have captions in other languages; others show vivid graphics or photographs of children. On the wall to the right of Li's desk, tacked there almost as a postscript, is a strip of three round stickers, each with a pink triangle and the words: "Silence = Death."

•Profile

Mary Li takes that message home on several levels — as a woman, as a person of color. She knows silence can mean the death of communities, the fracture of traditions, the extinction of a culture.

So Mary Li will not be silent. She will talk, with a mixture of outrage and cheerfulness, an even tone broken by ripples of laughter. She will tell you about racism in the white community, and homophobia in communities of color. She will point out privilege where she sees it and insist that we all take a look.

OMAC, a non-profit coalition of programs, is housed at the International Refuge Center of Oregon (IRCO), on East Burnside. As OMAC's sole paid staff, Li's job is to help educate minority communities about AIDS. Which means understanding those cultures — the Asian traditions that are her own, as well as the Black, Hispanic and Native American communities. From a community-of-color perspective, the state Health Department's "AIDS is a killer. Protect yourself" message was shouting in the wrong direction. The posters Li is preparing — colorful, hand-lettered, with flames leaping around the word "AIDS" — talk about preserving community.

The picture on the poster, of a skull and bones poking from a pot over a bed of flames, seems almost too morbid. But Li, drawing on a folktale analogy, explains the context.

"You have to let people know there is a tiger in the village and make them scared of the tiger so they can protect themselves . . . when you're talking about people who've been in refugee camps and seen relatives starve to death next to them, it takes a lot to shock."

Li knows that silence about the "tiger" of AIDS equals death. She is determined to break the equation.

"Previous to this, for the last five or six years, I worked in the area of domestic and sexual violence. I was getting pretty tired of working in primarily white organizations, being the only woman of color, being one of two women of color. I was feeling like I needed to be working in my own community, with my people.

"It's very hard. Say something happens to you at a job, and the same thing happens to me. You, as a white woman, have the privilege or the opportunity to not have to think, 'Did that happen to me because of racism; was that racist?' Whereas I have to look at everything through that screen. Also, trying to raise issues within the organization about racism, you become the 'bad person' because you're raising hard stuff all the time and people get tired of hearing about it.

"But even if people thought, 'Oh, Mary's on the soapbox again,' it still made them think. They had to deal with me. In some sense, you raise stuff for the other person, but also for yourself. I have to do it for me.

"Part of what's very different about working here at IRCO is that the office is mostly Asian, mostly refugee, and I love it. It's wonderful to hear different Asian languages, it's wonderful

photo by Anndee Hochman

that we have parties and we have ethnic food, Vietnamese food, Chinese food, Cambodian food. The reverse side of that is feeling sometimes that I traded racism for sexism. Because now I am working in an environment where most of the managerial positions are filled by men. White men or men of color. You'll hear disparaging comments about women every so often. And many of the women here haven't had the opportunity to be exposed to the extent of feminism that I have been immersed in.

"Basically OMAC is to provide HIV-infection and AIDS prevention education to communities of color in Oregon. I'm the only staff person; we have highly committed volunteer board members who actually began the organization. And then we have volunteers in various places in the state who we meet with, do co-trainings with, do speaking engagements. We don't do direct service; we're not planning to do direct service. Where our talents are best put is getting that prevention education out, and then advocating for those services that already exist to become more inclusive.

"What I do know is that within communities of color, if they have even heard about AIDS, by and large the perception is that it's a white gay male disease, and it has nothing to do with their community at all. And that's across the board, which is real scary. The numbers here, in terms of how many people of color have AIDS, are not very high, compared to places like New York and San Francisco. So it's very easy for our communities to continue to be in a state of denial.

"Also, when you look at the continuum of social problems that each community of color has to deal with — like crime, high unemployment, lack of access to health care, AIDS is just one more thing along that continuum. And because it's such a time-loaded thing, it's hard for people to say, 'Well, I may not have a way to feed myself and my family, or I may have my son get hooked on drugs. What's my concern about something I may or may not get five to seven years from now?'

"We're looking at our education efforts in a three-phase way. The first phase is basically to say that AIDS is dangerous. And that it's dangerous to YOU. We have a series of Asian-language posters that say, for instance, to the Chinese community: 'AIDS is dangerous to the Chinese culture. The Chinese people are special; the Chinese culture is a beautiful one. Preserve our culture. Protect our people.' That's basically all it says, and then there's artwork. The second phase of what we're doing is to say, '*How* AIDS is dangerous to you.' and then talk about sexual contact, and needles, et cetera.

"I think there is a major difference in the way messages have to be given to the minority communities. Family is a very big issue for people of color. Even if they're not connected to what we would stereotypically think of as family. Even if they're on the street, working the street or using drugs, they still have 'family.' If somebody's using drugs, they feel bad enough about themselves already. So if you're telling them, 'Take care of yourself,' and they're using drugs because they feel so bad about themselves, that's not going to be a big motivator. But if you say to them, 'Think about your wife or your girlfriend when you get home. If you're having sex with men, and you go home to your wife or your girlfriend, think about her, and think about your kids.' In all of our cultures, children are very, very important. The next generation is a big issue.

"We have a commitment to not mince the issues. So every time I go out, I talk about homophobia, I talk about how this is not a white male disease. I also talk about risk *behavior* as opposed to risk groups. What I think is somewhat tricky is being sexually explicit and talking about safer sex techniques. That is what we see as our third phase. I think that's hard for a couple of reasons. First of all, traditionally, condoms have been viewed as birth control. And when you, as white person, or anyone, come into a community of color and talk to them about something they perceive as birth control, you're touching on very sensitive subjects — of genocide and population control and all of those kinds of things.

"In the second place, in many cultures, it's a taboo to talk about those subjects openly. That doesn't mean that people-of-color communities don't talk about sex or don't have jokes about sex, but there are strict rules about how you do it.

"For instance, it would not be appropriate for me, as an Asian woman, to go to a group of Asian men and talk about safer sex. I've done it, and I was mortified, and they were mortified. It went okay, because I just said to them, 'This is very embarrassing for me; I know it's very embarrassing for you; so let's just get through it.' They were acculturated enough in western culture that it was okay.

"The message [OMAC gives to the white community] can be perceived as pretty confrontational; the message doesn't exclude talking about racism, and the message really talks about what is the responsibility of the white community to people of color. And I don't think any of those are easy things for white people to hear. And it's never easy for any of us to hear about accepting responsibility for the privilege we have. I really think that the white lesbian and gay community and the white community at large have to accept responsibility for racism and have to accept responsibility for the privilege they get for being white. Yes, we're all the have-nots, because gays and lesbians are no more well-liked than people of color are, and we have to work together and realize that. But we also have to acknowledge the differences. People-of-color communities have to accept responsibility for homophobia, as does the white heterosexual community, and they have to accept responsibility for the privilege they get by being majority heterosexual. That has to be our common commitment and understanding.

"At the most recent PAL training, I talked about not expecting people of color to relate in this intimate manner very easily, if at all. What I don't think people understand is that for a person of color to enter into a 'counseling' relationship — talking about their feelings, emotions, things that are inside of themselves — is not something that's going to happen very easily. Particularly if you're a white person. The majority of people who are PALs right now at CAP and the majority of people on the board and the majority of people on the staff are white. And a majority of them are male, and a majority of those men are gay men. That's problematic in terms of working with people of color.

"White gay males are still white men. I was at an AIDS conference in November and this one gay man stood up and said, 'You know, gay males don't think of themselves as being like white men. We think of ourselves as being gay men.' And this black man stood up and said, 'Well, you know, that's just you *choosing* to think about what you want to think about. You're still a white man. And your having the choice, to choose whether you're going to think about yourself as being a white man or not, is something I don't have. And that's your privilege.'

"What keeps me going? Well, a couple of things. One, I really feel like I'm in a constant state of rage. There's so much that's not okay about this world and our society. I couldn't *be* angry all the time, or I'd be crazy. But I feel anger is a great motivator to work. You have to use your emotions. They can either be barriers to you getting work done, or they can move you along.

"I love working with people of color. I love what I have been able to learn. Also, I work with a lot of women. There seem to be many of us in AIDS work. And I love to work with women. There's something really wonderful and affirming and life-giving about working with women, particularly women of color.

"I think everything is interrelated. So I can see the work that I'm doing here and how it helps to make change for all of us. And that's important to me. Also, I feel like I'm responsible. I'm responsible not only to the larger world, in terms of changing it, but I'm responsible to — not *for*, but *to* the people around me. And to myself, to do everything that I can." •

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