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since 1983

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The display advertising deadline is the Monday after the first and third Friday for the next issue.

Classified ads must be received at the **just out** office by 3 pm the Monday after the first and third Friday for the next issue, along with payment. Ads may be accepted by telephone with VISA or MasterCard payment.

Ad policy. No sexually exploitative advertising will be accepted. Compensation for errors in, or cancellation of, advertising will be made with credit toward future advertising.

Subscriptions to **just out** are available for \$17.50 for 12 issues. First Class (in an envelope) is \$30 for 12 issues.

A copy of **just out** is available for \$2. Advertising rates are available on request.

The mailing address and telephone numbers for **just out** are PO Box 14400, Portland, OR 97293-0400; (503) 236-1252. The phone number for the advertising department is 236-1253. Our fax number is 236-1257. Our e-mail address is JustOut2@aol.com.

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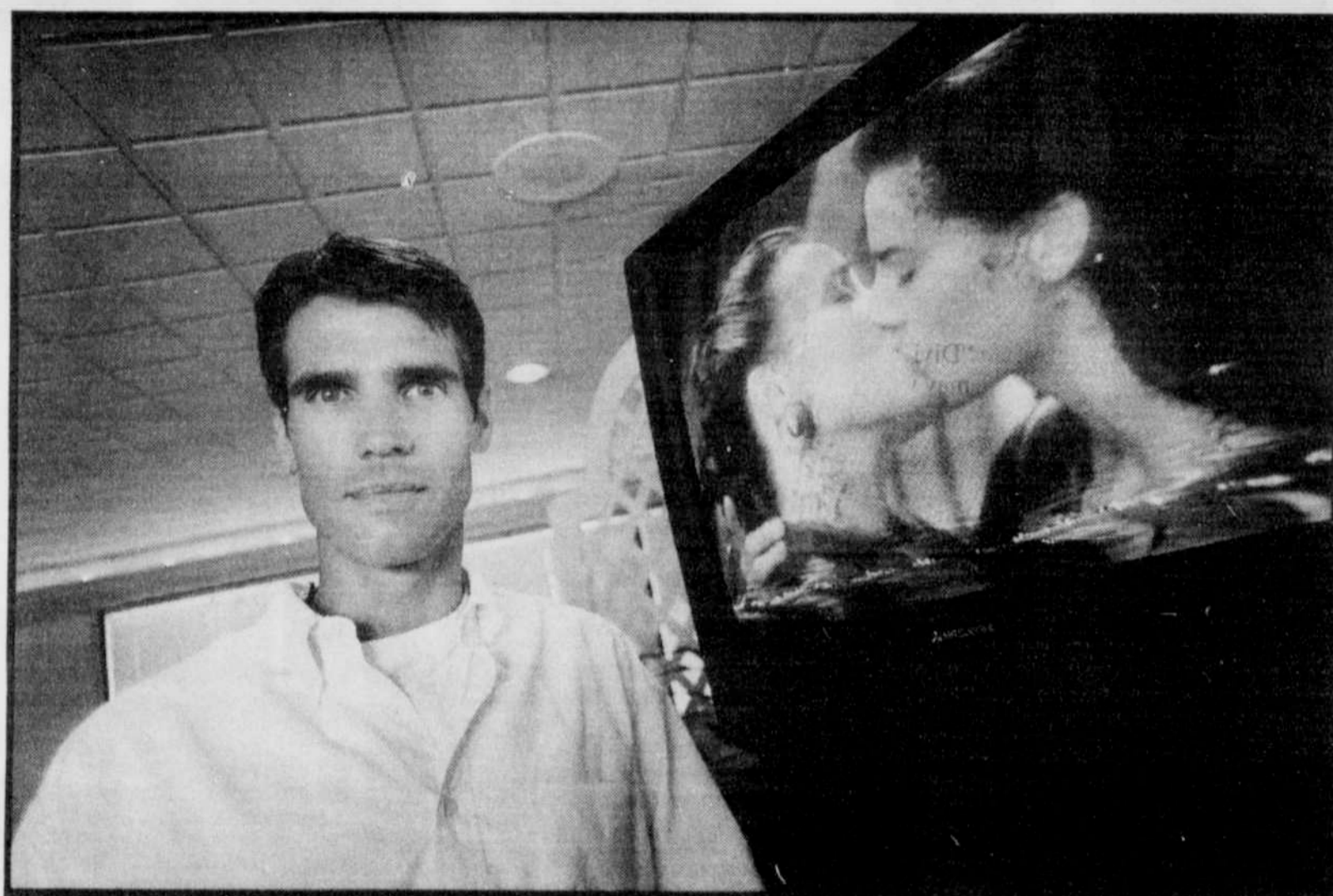


PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

The Portland Area Business Association luncheon in August featured guest speaker Steve Oster, supervising producer of Deep Space Nine. Behind him, a scene from a 1995 episode where Jadzia Dax, a primary character, kisses an old flame.

editorial

Genocidal neglect

Secretary Donna Do-Nothing needs to lift the ban on federal spending for needle exchange programs

by Sean Strubb

If I were the parent of a sexually active teenage girl, I would be scared to death and mad as hell at Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala.

Why? Because her failure to lift the ban on federal funding of needle-exchange programs has caused thousands of young women (girls, really) to acquire HIV from older, injection-drug-using male partners.

That's the underlying cause of the tremendous increase in HIV among girls 13 to 20. Most of these, along with about half of the pediatric cases, can be linked to dirty needles and the cold feet of Donna Shalala.

To many activists, these new HIV cases will be known as the Shalala Infections until Donna Do-Nothing lifts her ban on federal funding of needle exchange programs.

Her failure to do so will stand, historically, as an act of genocidal neglect. Elizabeth Taylor, last summer at the International AIDS Conference in Vancouver, called the failure to fund needle exchange "a measured act of premeditated murder." Papers with as diverse an editorial viewpoint as *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* have strongly urged the Clinton administration to find the political guts to fund needle exchange.

Secretary Shalala's record on this issue is pathetic, if not criminal. First she suppressed a pair of Centers for Disease Control reports urging the administration to lift the ban. Then she ignited an international firestorm of criticism from scientists more than a year ago, when she lied about findings from research on needle exchange. She falsely claimed there was "a controversy over research" and that "experts disagree" whether needle exchange reduces new infections or increases use of

illegal drugs. (In fact, there is unprecedented unanimity among researchers and public health experts on these two points.)

Shalala granted former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders an OK to lift the ban, but then quickly rescinded it after the Republicans swept the 1994 congressional elections. Elders recently commented about the difference between "commitment" and "concern" when it comes to AIDS. There is no compromise on commitment, she said, while concern leaves a lot of leeway.

Secretary Shalala is perhaps concerned. But her commitment is clearly to her own cowardly protection of a president terrified of taking any action that could be misconstrued by the right wing as evidence he is soft on drugs—even if the price of that cowardice is the infection of tens of thousands.

But what about Shalala's subordinates? Her supporters? Where are they on needle exchange? Do they offer lip service, or have they strongly lobbied Secretary Shalala, in writing, to lift the ban? Are they willing to accept the responsibility that their silence today truly means death tomorrow for thousands? Every genocidal atrocity requires "good soldiers" willing to overlook the impact of their actions...or their silence.

Increasingly, those who went into the Clinton campaign "committed" to fight AIDS have since been co-opted and can now only claim the mantle of "concern."

For those who haven't spoken up, they ought do so immediately. And loudly. They can still save their honor—and a place in history—by acting now. In the process, they can also save lives.

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