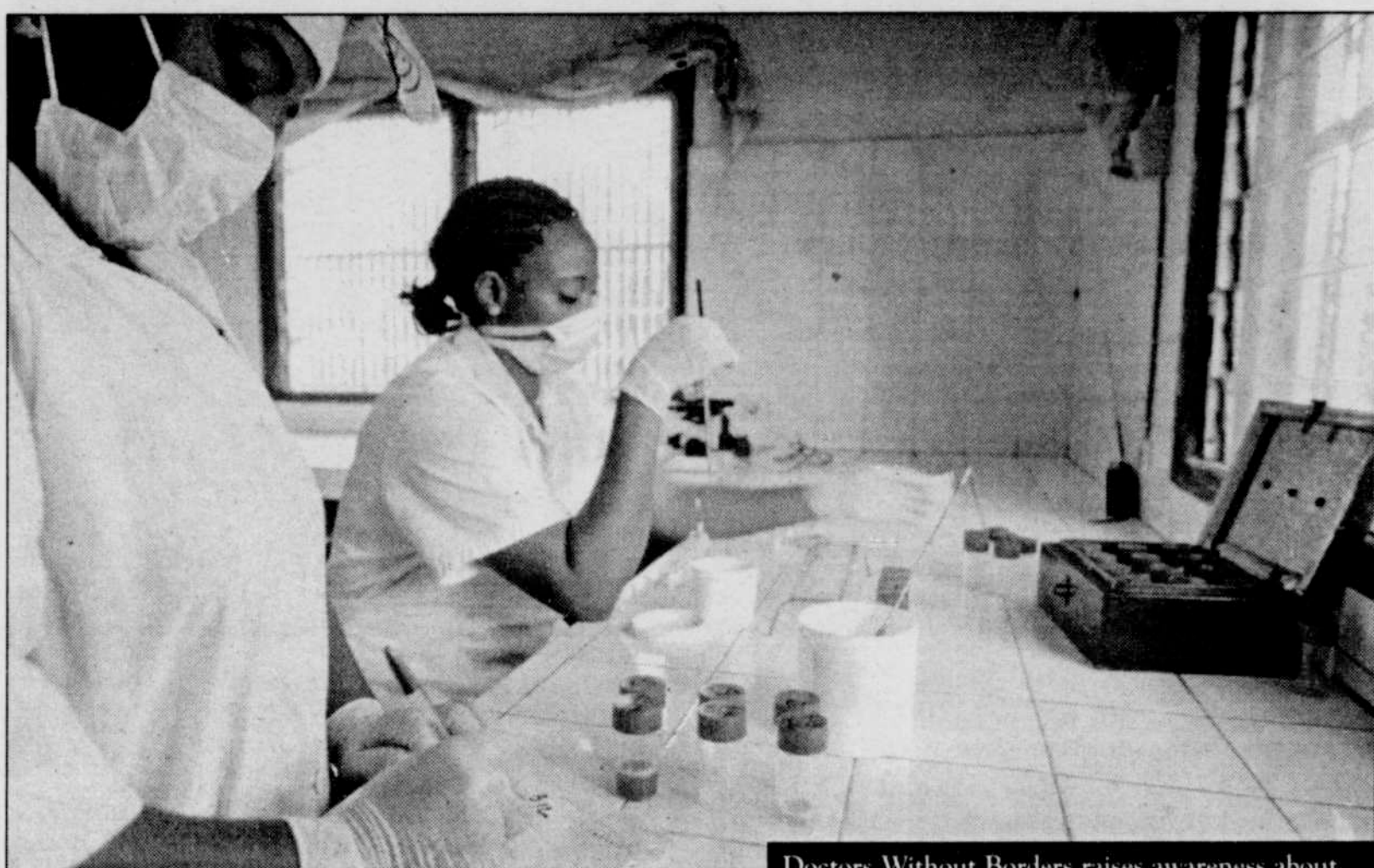




Doctors Without Borders raises awareness about research into diseases affecting developing countries

Rachel Cohen grew up in Portland, but today her attention is focused on a much larger geographical region: the Third World.

As U.S. advocacy liaison officer for the Access to Essential Medicines Campaign run by the New York-based Doctors Without Borders, she works to raise awareness of the great need for more research and development into treatments for diseases affecting people in developing countries. The nongovernmental organization, which won the 1999 Nobel Peace Prize, delivers emergency medical care to people in more than 85 countries.

Cohen always has been interested in activism, which runs in the family. "In high school I would organize concerts to benefit homeless youth shelters and things like that. But I, of course, did not know growing up what I know now about the world's grave injustices and inequalities. My father's side of the family have for decades been great activists—civil rights, anti-war, Cuba solidarity, women's rights, you name it. So I guess it's in the genes."

But her taste for political activism developed while studying in Quito, Ecuador, during her first year of college. She witnessed for the first time "such crushing poverty, such stark disparities in access to basic social services along economic and ethnic lines and such massive resentment of poor people toward the U.S. and other superpowers—largely due to the legacy of colonialism and the current reality of political and economic domination."

Cohen remembers her "true political awakening" in the week after her return from Ecuador. She was inspired by a speech given by

former Black Panther and political prisoner Angela Davis on the first day of Operation Desert Storm.

"Her lecture was impassioned, enraged, inspiring and immediately erupted into a small but passionate anti-war demonstration, which we took to the street. One week later a group of us organized several buses of people to go to D.C. to join an organized demonstration. This seems uncanny now, as we sit teetering on the edge of war with Iraq once again."

Cohen continued to be quite politically active on campus at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. She helped coordinate a women's group, a queer alliance, various anti-racism activities and lectures by prominent activists, writers and academics. "When the Oregon Citizens Alliance succeeded in getting Measure 9 on the Oregon ballot, I organized a 'Dine Against 9' event to raise money for the campaign," she shares.

In retrospect, Cohen views the activism of her college years differently. "Frankly, despite our good intentions, we were more or less living in oblivion. For example, the AIDS epidemic was exploding all around us—in the U.S.

and abroad—and although we did some awareness raising on campus about HIV/AIDS, we were fairly insulated from it on this small college campus in Maine."

Although she and her activist friends were supported and inspired by a handful of wonderful professors who "opened our eyes to everything from the history of African American political struggles in the U.S. to social movements in Latin America to ACT UP," she sees the priorities differently today. "If I were in college now, I would hope that someone would come tell me about how many millions of people are dying needlessly of AIDS and other infectious diseases simply because they do not have access to treatment—and give me the information I would need to do something about it."

Cohen became interested in the politics of health care "rather by happenstance" in her first job after college. She worked for a small organization called the US+Cuba Medical Project, which "sent shipments of medical aid to Cuba, brought delegations of health professionals to Cuba and educated the U.S. public about the impact of the U.S. embargo on the health of the population."

After the introduction of anti-retroviral therapy for the treatment of HIV in 1997, the organization brought together U.S. health care providers and Cubans living with HIV/AIDS to fight for access to treatment. "This was the beginning of my intense interest in AIDS in general and access to treatment in particular."

Cohen's next position at Housing Works, the largest minority-controlled AIDS service organization in the United States and an outgrowth of ACT UP, furthered her interest in providing direct assistance to those who lack access to health care. "I wanted to spend some time working on domestic AIDS issues in New York, and working at Housing Works was an incredible experience, largely because of the specific mission of the organization to not only provide direct services but also to advocate fiercely for the rights of homeless people living with HIV/AIDS."

However, Cohen knew even then that she wanted to work for Doctors Without Borders. She was always impressed with its humanitarian work and "the organization's mission to not only provide direct medical assistance to populations in danger but to speak out publicly when our teams in the field witness atrocities against civilians or willful neglect that results in needless death."

Learning about the Campaign for Access to Essential Medicines further strengthened her resolve to join Doctors Without Borders. "There was no question in my mind that this was the organization I wanted to work for."

The campaign began in 1999 in response to growing frustration by Doctors Without Borders volunteer medical professionals who were unable to treat patients because of ineffective, unaffordable, unavailable or highly toxic medicines. According to the World Health Orga-

Beyond Borders

Homegrown health activist helping the world's poor

by Caitlin Smith

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Tropical diseases and tuberculosis account for 11.4 percent of the global disease burden



As members of the sexual minorities community, Stephanie Davies (left) and Rachel Cohen understand the importance of addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS