



# NEW YORK NOTES

■ Maia Szalavitz

## The loneliness of the addict activist

It's hard to convey the sense of crisis felt by people using intravenous drugs and facing AIDS in the early '90s: in New York, at least half of needle users were already infected – at least 100,000 people – and there was no treatment, let alone cure or vaccine. For me, there was a deep frustration that most people in recovery seemed unwilling or unable to do anything about it.

While gay men had ACT UP street activism and Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) services, there were no similar groups for addicts in the US. In fact, the very idea seemed outlandish: Active addicts were thought to be too chaotic to even bother to save their own lives, let alone take political action.

Some treatment programs even refused to accept people infected with HIV. Organizations that should have been supporting us stood in the way of what would save our lives: opposing needle exchange and favoring harsh drug laws.

In those years, I was attending 12-step programs daily – and finding it extremely distressing that few recovering people seemed to think action against AIDS was essential. I recognized that the traditions wisely precluded political activism in the name of the program, but surely that didn't mean recovering people shouldn't otherwise try to fight for their own interests?

And so, in 1993, I wrote an op-ed for the Washington Post, using my own byline to show that it was possible to be “out” about recovery. It began like this:

*“People don't think of addicts like me when they imagine intravenous drug users. I'm a white woman who works as a producer for a national PBS talk show. Five years ago I was shooting cocaine and heroin up to 40 times a day.*

*“When Americans picture a heavy drug user, they see an ignorant, immoral, undisciplined criminal...But because addicts are in the closet, no one banishes that image. And this lets addiction and AIDS continue to kill us. If we want to fight those diseases, recovering addicts had better come out and organize”.*

In America, one bright spot of early addict activism was the work of Howard Josepher, a former heroin addict. He had been among the first graduates of Phoenix House. In 1988, he founded ARRIVE, a program to teach ex-offenders about HIV and AIDS, which soon became much more than that.

Josepher realized that Phoenix House's tough, confrontational approach wasn't going to be useful here. Something more welcoming was needed. Since ex-offenders weren't required to attend, honey was going to be far more useful than vinegar.

The lure would be that those who graduated the program could get jobs as outreach workers or at ARRIVE itself – and that they'd have a place where they were welcomed and respected. Crucially, people didn't need to stop using to participate. Users just out of prison who were not interested in staying drug-free proved willing to attend.

Today, more than 9,500 people have graduated, many going on to become leaders in New York's AIDS and addiction programs. Josepher's organization, Exponents Inc. is still going strong.

When ARRIVE began, the idea of having active and recovering users in the same program was practically blasphemous. But soon, ARRIVE found that the mix was actually therapeutic: often, the active users would cut down or quit because they were inspired by those who were abstinent. And even if they didn't, a study showed that they reduced their HIV-risk behaviors.

But Josepher wasn't content to simply provide jobs and training. He saw that political action was needed. And so ARRIVE soon began turning up at AIDS demonstrations or doing their own street actions, bringing dozens of users and ex-users to call for change.

Several other activist groups rose and fell quickly for different reasons. There were huge challenges. Active and recovering users feared each other; alcoholics didn't like addicts. There was the problem of relapse and addiction itself. To make matters worse, those who were beyond early recovery often wanted to put the past in the past – or thought that 12-step anonymity meant no activism related to addiction. Finally, there are the deep divisions of race and class faced by all activism and all the agenda issues including law reform.

These conflicts mean that there are still very few “out” users and former users organized politically around addiction. These issues remain tough, but ACT UP proved that a small group of committed people can absolutely change the world.

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