

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

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SPECTRUM

Be careful climbing the sex tree

Karen Schwartz

I had to do two “huge” projects in 11th grade. By “huge” I mean a 10 to 15 page paper and an oral report which took an entire semester to research—both grading periods. The paper had to be European history-related, so I did it on Dadaism (great word, lame art). The second one, for an elective called “Contemporary Issues,” had to be related to current events. I did mine on the Reagan administration’s AIDS

Nice Life

policy. The gist of it was, “the Reagan administration, by treating the AIDS virus as an illness related to immorality, is neglecting the seriousness of the epidemic.” Not very shocking. Not very original.

So why do I bring it up now? When I chose AIDS as my topic, I remember thinking to myself, “This is probably the way I’ll die. This is probably the way my friends will die.” For some reason, I don’t really think that now. Don’t get me wrong: being a huge hypochondriac, I’m still paranoid. But the urgency and the intensity are no longer there.

Why? Statistically, there’s every reason to be even more alarmed—the rise of the number of sexually transmitted diseases contracted by heterosexual women (since I am one), proof that there is no such thing as “safe” sex, and the fact that such an overwhelming number of New Yorkers are HIV positive. Yet for some reason, this doesn’t register on a gut level. Maybe it’s because AIDS is now a fashion statement. Somehow, that little red ribbon makes us more than sympathetic, more than “politically correct.” I think in some way it makes us feel immune.

At a party the other night, I was talking to an acquaintance, and we discovered that, lo and behold, we’d slept with the same person. Wacky,

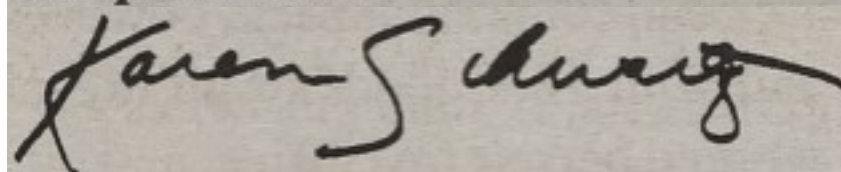
nutty, goofy, and, yes, tacky to discuss, but it got me wondering about a sex tree. While we had used condoms, I wondered how many other people he'd been with, how many people she'd been with and if just one of those people had been with just one person who had been with just one other person carrying HIV. What scared me even more than this scenario was the fact that I was able to dismiss this thought with a mere "hmmm" and go about my partying business virtually unscathed. Is it the closeness of the University environment that gives us this false sense of security? Perhaps. I just don't think that we take AIDS as the seri-

ous threat it is.

Has AIDS, the issue, become somehow passe? Strangely, the people wearing the AIDS ribbons, mourning the tragic deaths of Arthur Ashe and Rudolf Nureyev say, "Boy, I feel bad for people with AIDS. They have rights and they have my sympathy and doesn't society treat them like shit?" They don't say "There, but for luck, go I." And it seems that somehow they should. We make Magic Johnson and Arthur Ashe heroes, and no doubt, they are, but aren't we just further distancing ourselves from their plight? We criticized the Reagan and Bush administrations for treating those stricken with AIDS as "others," but aren't we, by disassociating ourselves from the clear and present danger that we too face, just the other side of the coin?

So what am I proposing? I haven't gotten so fearful and reactionary that I've started toting a Bible and preaching abstinence. I think we should each evaluate our own attitudes and behavior and see if we've been walking around with blinders on. There are definitely HIV-positive people on this campus, and they have a right to their privacy. I wonder if we have a right to our sense of security. Maybe it's time to get scared.

Karen Schwartz, BC '93, writes about her Nice Life on Mondays in *Spectrum*.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Karen Schwartz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Karen" is written in a larger, more prominent script, and "Schwartz" follows in a similar but slightly smaller script. The signature is written on a light-colored background.



Jason Zorn