

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

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[ARTICLE]

## SPECTRUM

### Good intentions in the age of AIDS

By Amy Blumenfeld

**P**icture it. Autumn in Morningside Heights. It's a warm, beautiful weekend afternoon and a group of Columbia students are walking to a friend's apartment for lunch. As they cross Amsterdam Avenue and walk up the street, they notice a middle aged woman clutching a lamppost and bleeding profusely from her face and arms. Her clothes, grocery packages, and the concrete on which she is standing are all stained with blood. Her hair is mussed, her clothes shabby, and she stares blankly straight ahead. Although she is silent and does not ask for assistance, her body seems to cry out for help. What should they do?

This sounds like an essay question given to a high school health class. Unfortunately, it is a true story and was the predicament in which my friends and I found ourselves this past weekend. As we passed this woman, all of our heads turned. At first we stood there, like idiots, staring, not doing a thing while a man from the bodega on the corner was trying to verbally help her—he wouldn't touch her. It was clear that this woman needed physical assistance, but everyone was afraid to

come in contact with the blood. Finally, some of my friends went over. At first she resisted, but then she grabbed my friend and wrapped her arms around his neck, expecting him to carry her into her apartment. While one person went over to the next building to dial 911, the rest of us stood there shouting, "Be careful with the blood!" and "Don't touch your eyes or your mouth!" As my friends took the woman inside, neighborhood security drove by. The officer got out of the car with a walkie-talkie and did absolutely nothing. He didn't call for assistance, he didn't help my friends, and he didn't go near the woman. He shrugged and left the scene. I couldn't believe it. Approximately 10 minutes after we had called 911,

an ambulance arrived to help the woman, and we went to our friend's place for lunch.

As I left the scene I couldn't help but think of what would have happened to the woman if we hadn't been there. Who would have helped her? It certainly wouldn't have been the man from the bodega or the security officer; neither one would touch her. It's understandable; after all, AIDS and other blood related diseases are rampant in our society, and shielding ourselves from these ills has been ground into our heads through the media, teachers, parents, peers—you name it. Everywhere we look there are ads advocating "safe sex" and the use of condoms to help prevent the spread of the virus. If we are urged to protect ourselves from people as close as loved ones, we certainly must take the same precautionary mea-

take the same precautionary measures when dealing with strangers. But how can we possibly practice “safe emergency?” Are we going to carry a set of rubber gloves with us everywhere we go—just in case? What can we really do in an emergency situation to help the injured and at the same time protect ourselves? Call 911, you say? Well, maybe this concept is a bit far-fetched, but what if the ambulance doesn’t respond immediately to your call? It’s happened before. What do we do? Don’t we have a moral responsibility to help others in need? How can we consciously walk by and ignore a fellow human being’s plight? But what about us? We must protect ourselves too.

These are tough questions. Looking back, it’s interesting to note the different immediate reactions my friends and I had to this situation. About half of the group approached the woman and offered help. The other half, of which I was a part, stood by and tried to call for professional help. Until then, I didn’t realize how much the AIDS campaigns had affected me. It is evident that their efforts are a success because my immediate instinct was to stay

away from the woman because, “you never know.”

My question is this: Where do you draw the line between helping someone and protecting yourself? In today’s society, it’s a difficult call. I wonder what will become of “local heroes” and “good Samaritans.” Will they become extinct, or will people just proceed to help others despite the risks? Either way, I hope the ambulance crews improve their arrival time.

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