

Subject: Re: "A Positive Attraction" November 1, Independent News

Nate & Grove: Of Two Minds

Homos and Heteros in the Same Boat

By Nate Klarfeld
and Grover Lawlis



We recently returned from hosting a straight and gay HIV cruise organized by the Indy's travel writer Paul Stalbaum and Sheri Kaplan of The Center for Positive Connections, a predominantly heterosexual group. We got together on Holland America's The Zuiderdam to explore the eastern Caribbean. Carefully side-stepping Hurricane Wilma's winds of destruction, we enjoyed ourselves with the combination of brotherly and sisterly bonding and partying till 1 or 2 a.m. We had classes and seminars about HIV during the day, and went on various shore excursions in ports. As one of our enthusiastic cruisers put it, "I just returned home after having spent the past week cruising the Caribbean aboard Holland America's The Zuiderdam. I was one of approximately 120 Poz individuals who, along with their significant others (gay or straight) enjoyed a wonderful week of sun, relaxation, great food, informative presentations {Nelson's – (Nelson Vergel) --was superb as always}, discussion groups, island hopping, dancing under the full moon, and just thoroughly celebrating life along with many, many new and interesting friends."

The ocean breezes and the ship were an aphrodisiac. There were guys and girls holding a different man's hand each night. There were others who met and romanced each other throughout the cruise. One guy fell for his cruise partner so hard that rather than going home, he went to the other guy's hometown to be with him. (Perhaps a wedding at sea next year?) Then there was the usual quick encounter meant for the less serious. All aboard the Love Boat!

The greatest part for most everybody was being with other very bright and interesting HIV-positive people and making new friends. One of the first things we heard was, "Nobody can understand an HIV-positive person like another HIV-positive person." It started off with an icebreaker, a few drinks, some laughter, and some prizes for those who won the get-to-know-you contest. Grove with his neuropathy had been concerned about being able to get around on a 900 foot ship, so he rented an electric scooter and made the rounds on wheels. The ship's staff loved driving it off and parking it after he was comfortably seated for a four or five course meal. The two of us separated and sat at different tables with different people at just about every meal. We heard some very interesting things. Nate got around so well that by the end of the cruise he was given a certificate as "The Most Accommodating."

It seems like the straight poz folks have a harder time coming out and finding each other than gay people. We find it easier and more accepting to run into friends and possible partners as we go out into the world. M.C. Mars, contributing editor for the Poz magazine, thanked the gay group for their help in getting all of the services available to people living with HIV. He has recently written a book called, Don't Take the Long Way, a series of stories of an HIV-positive, straight, San Francisco cabdriver. He did a



hilarious rapper routine during the talent show. There were also a writer and a photographer from the clothing manufacturer Benneton, doing a feature story for their next quarterly publication.

The cruise was good for people who live in areas where there are very few HIV-positive people or for people who are in the closet about their HIV for various reasons. It gave them a long-awaited chance to meet others with the same problems and exchange experiences. It was enlightening for straights to meet with gays. For example, the woman who asked Nate in a whisper if a cock ring kept the semen from coming out. When we had support groups, educational activities, and amusement activities, the same number of gays and straights came. There were outings on islands, snorkeling, scuba diving, fishing, a catamaran, scooter rides, and other things that everybody took part in. One night, Nate showed the movie, *Sordid Lives*. On another evening, we had a fabulous Elton John impersonator, and, another afternoon, we watched one of the cruisers' appearance on *Wheel of Fortune* where he won the money to pay for the trip. He later did an improv group which was actually laughter therapy, and it was a hilarious participation experience.

Nelson Vergel gave a couple of very interesting lectures on new drugs being tested. Unfortunately, on St. Thomas, he had a motor scooter accident and broke his patella and had to be airlifted home. The Poet Laureate of the group, a straight guy, wrote a poem for the talent show about the cruise and said, "Then there was the incident with Nelson on the scooters, At least you know he wasn't looking for Hooters." As you can see from this column, everyone had a great time, and both straights and gays learned a lot about themselves and HIV. The lesson learned was: We are in the same boat. Have a peaceful fortnight.