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## Portrait of an Epidemic

Jennifer Jones

Banish R. *Focus on Living: Portraits of Americans with HIV and AIDS*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003. Paper; 288 pages; \$24.95.

Less a book of photography than a revealing portrait of the lives of HIV-positive men and women, Roslyn Banish's book *Focus on Living* accomplishes mightily what it sets out to do: re-empower the icon of the individual in the face of an epidemic too often symbolized by the anonymity and sterility of statistics. The format of the book—photographs of individuals paired with their personal narratives—invites the reader to enter into each story. This privileged access to the intimate details of personal history and daily life creates a space in which the reader's own concept of "the face of AIDS" can grow and change.

Starting from dramatically different points—from a Native American reservation in Utah to rural Texas to cities like New York and Oakland—the common realities of life after diagnosis affirm the conviction that while treatments are sustaining lives and transforming the nature of what it means to be HIV-positive, the disease still has very real and far-reaching implications. The narratives cross lines of sexual orientation, race, class, and background, capturing a wide spectrum not only of lifestyles and attitudes, but also of perspectives on life, its dreams and disappointments, and ways of reconciling the future with the complications wrought by a disease.

The narratives also tackle the extended dimensions of HIV: addiction, homophobia, stigma, enculturated silence, sexual activity, dating, childhood abuse, and disclosure. Each subject shares the ways in which his or her life has been transformed by HIV. Two incarcerated women talk about how knowledge of their HIV-positive status moved them to reform the entirety of their lives. One young man shares how his experience with the disease has moved him to greater levels of acceptance, both of himself and of the family that has shunned him. Stories such as these, in combination with photographs that cap-

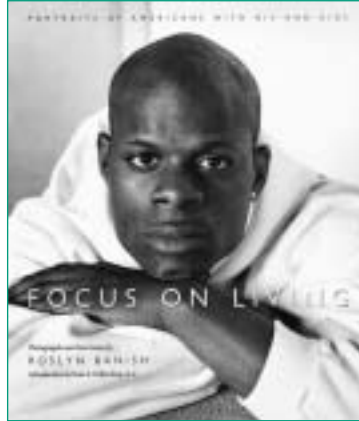
ture the subtleties of each participant's emotional life—his or her humor, pride, disillusionment, and sadness—shifts the image of HIV away from the numbers and maps that often define the epidemic towards the personal and emotional truths at the heart of any disease.

In this way, the book creates a mosaic of the realities of life with HIV. It does a great service re-humanizing the face of AIDS by presenting stories of people as they are and by depicting the ways they cope with the cascade of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual effects that an HIV-positive result triggers. It deserves to be read for the information it provides, but its greatest contribution is the wisdom it

imparts through illustrations of tenacity and courage among people with a "life-threatening" disease who nonetheless seem unafraid to live.

### Author

Jennifer Jones is a graduate student in literature at Mills College and a staff member of the UCSF AIDS Health Project's Publications Unit.



### Next Issue

Despite the pervasiveness of "harm reduction" interventions, many people conceive of harm reduction in terms of particular strategies, such as needle exchange, and in opposition to others, for example, abstinence-based drug treatment. Yet, at its foundation, harm reduction is an approach that excludes nothing from its menu of client-centered options. In the January issue of *FOCUS*, **Edith Springer, ACSW**, a pioneer in the field of harm reduction and the Director of Clinical Services at New York Harm Reduction Educators, discusses the key tenets of harm reduction and their broad application.

Harm reduction for methamphetamine users may be particularly complex and is crucial to battle the growing epidemic of use among men who have sex with men. Also in the January issue, **Susan Kingston** of the Seattle and King County Department of Public Health and **Miles Conrad** of Seattle Counseling Services review harm reduction approaches for methamphetamine users.