The Ironically Beautiful Face of HIV/AIDS

by Sandra R. Dent

Assignment Description: To write a response essay for the Honors class, AIDS: A Global Catastrophe regarding Rebekka Armstrong's presentation—if attended—on living with the effects of HIV/AIDS and being a former Playboy Bunny.

According to the comments appearing in a December 1, 2009 Canton Repository article, she was too muscle bound, looked like a man and was a role model not suitable for our local society's genteel sensibilities. Having witnessed the work and effort involved in allowing for Rebekka Armstrong's appearance, one would hope collective heads were lifting up from their places in the sand. One would hope.

A first impression produced a self-assured, raspy-voiced, enormous blue-eyed, muscular woman, in outwardly healthy shape. A strong, confident handshake and a look straight in the eye, never wavering belied the fatigue that must have been present. It was as if being greeted by a long-unseen friend. She noticed everyone and everything. As soon as a new person entered the room she immediately acknowledged their presence without ignoring anyone already introduced. The girl could work the room.

Her story was told with a style of poignant humor, producing uneasy laughter from the audience, as if a person with HIV/AIDS could certainly not possess a sense of humor. Look closely, the pain is there, emotional, physical memories a person of forty-three years should not experience. Self-derisive, she was honest, forth-coming, apologizing for nothing. She took full responsibility for her actions, blaming no one. She dealt stealthily with lapses of memory by taking steps backward—a rewinding of sorts—and then moved forward continuing with her story.

She is a powerful, beautiful person who has decided to take immeasurable challenges given her and turn them into something meaningful. She has exposed herself in more ways than just a Playboy Bunny, she has set herself up intentionally as a target for everyone's preconceived notions, biases and prejudices. She faces all this so that potentially one unknown person in her audience could be informed, comforted and acknowledged for who they are; someone wanting information. Not just any information, but lessons to live in a world of hate with the muscles to withstand the criticism of a community of the brain-dead and perhaps be the next to carry the single torch of knowledge.

Bravo, Ms. Armstrong, Bravo.