Raising Her Bar

Gloria Reuben's new series, *Raising the Bar* (on TNT), recently clocked a record 7.7 million viewers. That's all the more people this celebrity activist can reach in her global fight against AIDS. The bar has officially been reset.

December 3, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

The first time I saw Gloria Reuben she descended with regal portage from a giant black Escalade that had rolled up to the front door of the barn where I live in New Jersey. She'd come to film part of a Cable Positive documentary she was hosting, called *Women and HIV*—we were going to chat about my learning I was positive and then later publicly disclosing as editor-in-chief of *POZ* magazine.

It's not easy to talk about having HIV, no matter how many times you discuss it. But it is easier when the interviewer's strong, velvety voice always reassures, "It's going to be okay."

Gloria's not HIV positive. But perhaps her compassion for those living with the virus comes from a previous TV role: HIV-positive Jeanie Boulet on the NBC series *ER* (the role earned her nods for a Golden Globe and multiple Emmys).

Gloria was very involved in her character and story line. "When I left the show, I fought tooth and nail to make sure that this woman left standing—walking out of the hospital. There was no way after all that we did in creating her character, helping her to deal pretty successfully with the challenges of living with the virus, that I was going to let that be weakened in any way. Thankfully I really stuck to my guns, because the show continues to be repeated around the world. People from France, Japan, Germany and Australia stop me on the street here in Manhattan and say, 'I just love your show, I just saw you last week.' It was a kind of a silent activism, I think, when the show was on the air."

Gloria, now 44, continues her role of HIV activist off-screen. When she's not speaking about AIDS to a small, but rapt, crowd gathered at the Minnesota AIDS Project (not far from her home country of Canada), she can be found working with various HIV/AIDS organizations, such as the U.S. Conference on AIDS, and Bobby Kennedy Jr.'s Waterkeeper Alliance, a grassroots non-profit organization that preserves and protects the waterways of the world.

"I feel compelled to do as much as I can," she says. "The more you see and the more you do it, the

more that you feel you have to do."

And now that she's back in the mainstream limelight—playing Rosalind Whitman, head of the public defender's office, on the TNT legal drama *Raising the Bar*—Gloria is shining her spotlight on issues dear to her.

One such issue is the latest figures for AIDS among African Americans (blacks comprise 45 percent of all new HIV infections in the United States despite the fact that they comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population). "The mainstream media have certainly dropped the ball when it comes to the issue of HIV in black America," says Gloria, who points to a speech by Senator Hillary Clinton as an "A-ha!" moment: "Hillary said, 'If AIDS were the No. 1 killer of white women in this country, there would be an outrage.' That was the first time I literally jumped out of my seat. I said, 'Thank you God! Somebody finally said it.' It was the first time I heard it put that way from anybody in that position and aired on a national news program."

Indeed, the press has not responded with appropriate levels of outrage at the rate of HIV/AIDS infections among African Americans. Not to mention the fact that African Americans are more likely to get simultaneously diagnosed with HIV and AIDS, indicating they discover they're carrying the virus much later than their white counterparts. When asked to comment on whether these things might have something to do with the black community's understandable suspicion of the medical establishment, Gloria says, "There's a mutual kind of responsibility here. It's embarrassing that this country does not have a national AIDS strategy—a point-by-point strategy on how to increase awareness, prevention, testing and treatment. But individuals and communities [also] need to take responsibility."

Gloria also passionately advocates for African-American women to take better care of their overall health. "In the African-American community in this country, there is a big problem with just taking care of oneself across the board when it comes to health. I'm talking first and foremost about diet, exercise, regular checkups and having respectful and sustainable relationships," she says, acknowledging that issues such as economics, housing and incarceration also influence health.

"I know that there's a great disparity when it comes to who takes care of the family in the African-American community. We all know that the women lead the way and do everything. At the same time, a person can ask for support and resources to help them out. And you know what? If you're overloaded, don't have any more kids."

Gloria ends her tough love advice on a reflective note: "I think the community as a whole is not supportive of black women and it's tough to tell someone, 'Please take care of yourself' when either everyone around them is not doing that and/or they don't necessarily get the support from their own families or the community as a whole. In a way, not only is it a women's rights issue, but it's also about human rights when you talk about the lack of good jobs or equal pay or not being able to support oneself as an individual or support one's family on your own if needed."

The next time I met Gloria was at the premiere of *Women and HIV.* She'd had minor foot surgery

and was wearing a large Stormtrooper-like plastic boot, the kind that looks like it's used to mend broken bones. Nevertheless, when introduced, she gracefully hobbled to the podium. She spoke of her experience working with all five HIV-positive women in the film and, in doing so, made us all cry—in a happy way. For me, it was joyous to know that the connection we'd felt wasn't an act.

Later, I asked Gloria about the need for women to support one another. She brought up the way media have pitted women against each other. "Since a few years back, the lyrics of gangster rap and hip-hop have all been about women competing with women for a guy," she says. "There's this dog-eat-dog quality rampant in the African-American community when it comes to women. I don't know if it is because of the challenges of the not-so-great job market or the [rates of] incarceration [of black men], but something is making women think, 'Oh, I [have to] get a good man and do whatever it takes to do that.'" The way to change that, she says, is to change the way we portray women in the media.

Then I ask her whether *Raising the Bar* will address HIV issues in any way. Gloria says that, although she's not at liberty to divulge specifics, a character in the show will become involved in a sexual relationship that puts her at risk for HIV.

I wonder out loud what she thinks about working a safer sex plotline in the show.

"It would be a great thing," she says. "I'm not saying bring it up by even talking about it. I'm just saying have the character whip a condom out of her purse and sexually open it up with her teeth."

That would be awesome, I say.

"Yes, that's it right there," Gloria says.

For me, as an AIDS activist and journalist, it is exciting to see a celebrity so deeply moved by the stories of people living with HIV, and so deeply understanding of all its complex issues.

Given the fact that so many people in the United States are still contracting this usually preventable disease (nearly 56,300 people a year; almost half of them black), and that people still die from this illness (about 14,000 a year, the majority of them black), we need powerful black activists such as Gloria to grab people's attention.

The most recent time I saw Gloria was in South Africa. She had come to Johannesburg (Joburg) to serve in another new role: celebrity ambassador for the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation (EGPAF), an organization that helps to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Fresh from starring in a play about human rights called *Speak Truth to Power*, in Capetown, Gloria met us at EGPAF offices in Joburg one morning this past August and we traveled to a suburb nearby. Gloria listened intently as Pam Barnes, the CEO of EGPAF, briefed us on what we were going to do and what we might see.

Indeed, it was hard to process the level of poverty, disease and pain we encountered. But, thanks

to EGPAF, more and more HIV-positive women in South Africa are taking medicine to save their lives and the lives of their babies.

I watched Gloria and Pam talk with patients, doctors, midwives and nurses, listening intently about what was needed: food, clean water, fresh towels, more nurses, even sheets to hang from pipes to separate the beds in the delivery rooms.

Later, I asked Gloria: If you could achieve one thing in your new role as celebrity ambassador for EGPAF, what would it be?

“I’d like to address the issue of conspiracy—to just erase that thought completely from every mind,” she answers. “Part of what you struggle with when you have HIV [if you are black] is believing that there’s this greater whole that actually wants you to be ill. If there’s one thing I could instill in this time of Barack Obama, it would be this feeling of hope. There is hope for those who are HIV positive, for those who are afraid to get tested.”

Despite feeling the comfort of Gloria’s velvety voice, I register her words as more tough love. Again, she acknowledges the extraordinary disparities black Americans face—lack of good housing, job opportunities, education or basic health care. “All those issues need to be addressed in order for the spread of this virus to stop,” she says. “But above and beyond all of this, the black community must understand that AIDS is not a conspiracy.”

Finally, she says, the community must address the shame, stigma and denial associated with HIV. “The denial and the stigma—which you and I witnessed in South Africa, but which is as rampant here in the United States—must stop,” she tells me, explaining that shame, whether placed on us by society or self-inflicted, keeps us from seeking health care when we need it.

“Oh my God, what an incredible gift it would be to eradicate shame,” she exclaims. “Wow! Do you know how lifted people would feel?”

I do.

BABY BASICS
How HIV-positive moms give birth to HIV-negative infants
By Laura Whitehorn

Many Americans believe that women with HIV cannot give birth to HIV-negative children. Not true—in fact, with proper HIV health care, the risk of transmitting the virus from mother to child is now between 1 and 2 percent. Below are the basics of how it’s done:

DURING PREGNANCY a positive woman takes HIV meds to suppress the amount of virus in her bloodstream. Certain HIV drugs are approved for moms-to-be; others pose a risk of birth defects and are avoided. (Of course, HIV-positive women also do all the things negative moms do to protect infants—avoid cigarettes and alcohol, eat well and get prenatal checkups, for example.)

DURING CHILDBIRTH mom has another HIV drug delivered intravenously throughout labor; she also continues her regular HIV drug regimen. Years ago, women were advised to have their babies by caesarean section to avoid transmission risk. Now, however, with powerful meds to suppress HIV (and reduce the risk of passing the virus to infants), only mothers whose HIV viral loads top 1,000 need C-sections.

AFTER CHILDBIRTH the baby receives an HIV drug for six weeks. Positive moms do not breast-feed their babies—breast milk can transmit HIV.

DURING INFANTS' FIRST 18 MONTHS, they often test positive for HIV even though they are actually negative. This is because the HIV test screens for antibodies to HIV, not the virus itself. During pregnancy, babies absorb proteins (including antibodies) from their mothers. The newborn baby of a positive mother may have antibodies to HIV for as long as 18 months. Many hospitals now use a blood test that screens newborns for HIV itself instead of just antibodies. Those babies rarely test positive; a follow-up test six months later makes sure. Get details at poz.com.

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