

## Behind the Headlines

# The fire under Fierstein

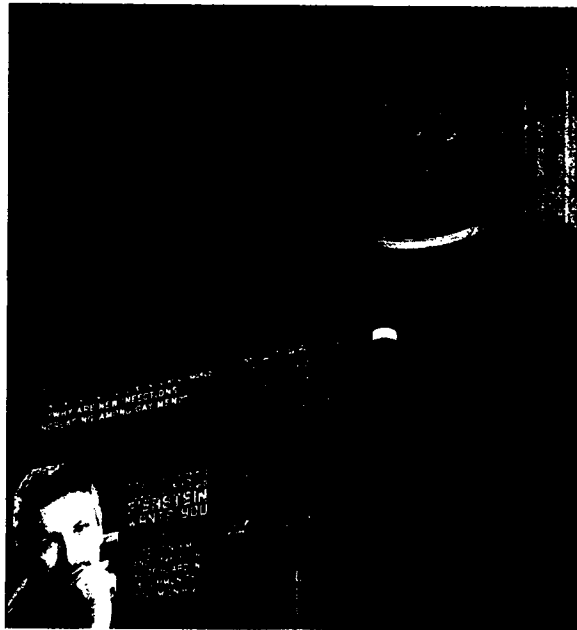
Afraid that a new generation of young gay men are falling victim to AIDS, Harvey Fierstein is taking matters into his own hands

**H**arvey Fierstein has always been a fierce AIDS activist. But with recent studies showing increased HIV infection rates and reports of young gay men actually going out to seek infection, the Broadway star says being fierce may not be enough.

In a July 31 editorial in *The New York Times*, Fierstein called on his fellow gay people to join him in doing more to educate young gay men about the horrors of the disease, and now he's following through on that commitment. On November 16, Fierstein hosted an emotionally charged public forum at New York City's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center to talk about ways to keep young gay men from getting HIV. During the standing-room-only event, concerned attendees discussed the apparent lack of understanding about HIV that has resulted from a dearth of effective gay-focused public awareness campaigns.

After the event, Fierstein spoke with *The Advocate's* Benjamin Ryan about his efforts to save a new generation from the ravages of HIV/AIDS.

**You've been critical of how drug companies show healthy images of HIV-positive men in their ads. So how do we**



Fierstein at the New York forum: "We need to get the message out"

**make HIV unattractive to young people?**

We've spent a lot of energy making sure that the HIV-positive community is not discriminated against. But we have spent no energy at all making sure that health is something that is glorified. We need to glorify our health. I'm calling a couple of people I know that are at big advertising agencies, and I'm going to Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, and I'm saying, "Do we have the resources to do an ad campaign of our own?" You could take a young, gorgeous guy and have him say, "I have these dreams. I'm still in school. I'm just starting out. I want to be a Broadway star. And the last thing I want is to have to worry about being sick."

**I understand you were inspired to take on this cause after seeing the movie *The Gift*, in which young gay men known as "bug chasers" seek out infection.**

Well, sort of. It's probably the reality that did it more. But *The Gift* was something that I've been pushing to, yeah.

**There has been controversy over the prevalence of bug chasers in the gay population. Have you encountered them?**

I've never met a bug chaser. But I watched *The Gift*, and I got online and found [bug chaser] sites. Exactly how many people it is, I don't know. I just know that if that attitude exists at all, that's really bad.

**What would you say to someone if he identified as a bug chaser?**

Anybody who thinks that AIDS is something you want in your life is ridiculous. Nobody in their right mind would want to spend the rest of their lives waiting for somebody else to give them the solution to their life. You're taking away the power of your own life to wait for some scientist to come up with a pill for you. The great part of being an American and living in this country is, your destiny is yours to do with what you want.

**What scares you the most about the rise in HIV infection rates?**

The waste of another generation. We lost an entire generation. We lost our youngest, our brightest, our most outgoing. We have no idea what that generation would have done, and we can't afford to lose another person.

**How could AIDS groups step up their efforts to reduce infection rates?**

I think they need to get loud to the community; they need to get loud to kids. We need to get the message out there that says that AIDS is not worth dying for.

**Where do we start?**

First of all, you do it with role models. I mean, role models do everything for heterosexual kids, so why wouldn't it work for homosexual kids? I think we need to make sure that the programs in our schools are there so the kids know that it's OK to be out, that everything is available to them, that they can have full, rich lives.