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Focus on SANDRA THURMAN After eight months as AIDS czar for the Clinton administration Atlantan Sandra Thurman keeps going in the face of opposition. She has emerged as Clinton's most fluent commentator on the disease. "I'll do this as long as I
M.A.J. McKenna / STAFF WRITER,
HEADLINE CONTINUED:

can humanly stand it ---or get fired, " she vows.

AIDS mission captures her passion for life

BEGIN TEXT:

There is no getting around the subject, so you might as well deal with it up front:

When people imagine an AIDS activist, Sandra Lyne Thurman is not what they see.

Tall, slender, blond, French-manicured, in a slim black suit and a big yellow diamond, Thurman is a checklist of double takes: not male, not gay, not angry, not black leather-Doc Marten-downtown.

It feels incorrect, these days, to suggest that appearance is a factor in success. But ignoring that Thurman is beautiful would be like ignoring that she is political to her bones. Her looks, and the way men with money and power react to them, have been a constant in her life for more than 20 years.

Because she is supremely practical, she recognizes this. Because she is deeply committed to the cause of AIDS, she uses it, when she has to.

"My father used to say, " she says serenely, "that by the time anyone figured out I had a brain, I had their signature on the bottom line and their check in the bank."

Atlanta in D.C.

Thurman has been director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy for eight months. The 44-year-old Atlantan took the job at a time of great hope and great tumult: Deaths were decreasing, and the enormous early success of potent new drugs spurred hope that AIDS might become a survivable disease. But the drugs' success also sparked a belief that the epidemic had ended, threatening funding needed for the rising rates of infection among women, minorities and the poor.

From the start, Thurman was clear on her priorities: giving AIDS a strong voice at the White House; linking local groups to national policy-making; restoring the government's ability to provide clean free needles for addicts; finding funds for AIDS vaccine research.

One day before World AIDS Day, the verdict is mixed. Front-line activists still claim Thurman as one of their own. There has been major success: Barely a month after Thurman took office, President Bill Clinton announced a \$150 million federal initiative to find a vaccine. But there also has been significant frustration: Despite her efforts, progress on needle exchanges has stalled.

She has emerged as the administration's most vivid and fluent commentator on the epidemic. Last week, the United Nations reported the global AIDS situation to be much worse than had been

thought: Up to 30.6 million HIV infections around the world, mostly in the developing world. Thurman, just returned from a fact-finding trip to Africa, was ready with the big picture.

"I think we knew the epidemic was moving faster than we could capture, but I had no idea the numbers would be as large as they are in fact," she said in an interview.

Ties to Clinton campaigns

Thurman has spent 15 years in the struggle against AIDS, and she retains an undiminished anger and passion. "No one should take this job," she said not long ago, "who hasn't changed an adult diaper with their own hands."

She spent 10 of those years at AID Atlanta, steering it from the brink of collapse to the largest AIDS service provider in the Southeast. After short stints with the Carter Center and the U.S. Information Agency, the call came from Clinton offering her the position of "AIDS czar."

A longtime friend of adviser James Carville, Thurman had worked in the 1992 and 1996 campaigns.

For someone like Thurman, raised to a family tradition of public service, there is only one answer to a presidential request. She moved into a small office near the White House, working among empty Diet Coke cans, stacks of pink phone messages and a signed photo of Clinton, who told reporters he had chosen her because "she speaks the truth unvarnished."

Some groups complained early on that her job was a patronage position; once again, they said, the post had gone to someone whose expertise was politics, not science. But other activists fired back.

"I want my doctor to know medicine and my White House person to know politics, and that's what I got," said Mike Shriver, deputy executive director for policy at the National Organization of People with AIDS.

"AIDS Action gives her very high marks at this point," said Daniel Zingale, executive director of the powerful national organization. "We've seen the highest levels of federal funding for care, prevention, research and housing ever this year, and Sandy helped to fuel that success."

Family of crusaders

Thurman has a Southerner's acute consciousness of history, and a rich past to draw on. "My mother was the chair of the Georgia Democratic Party," she said. "My mother's mother was an advocate for prisoners' rights. And my great-grandmother believed in education for all children, including black children, which in Rome, Ga., at the turn of the century was not the most popular position."

It is hard to talk for long about Thurman without hearing about her mother, who died in 1982.

"Marge was larger than life, literally and figuratively," said Thurman's ex-husband Michael Clutter, an attorney and restaurant investor who owns Bulldog & Co., a gay bar in Midtown. "I am 6 feet, and when we stood toe-to-toe I had to look up to make eye contact. And she was an attorney, in the South, back when it was hard to be an attorney at all and be a woman."

One of Marge Thurman's first cases was a black woman who had defended herself from an abusive husband and was convicted of murder, at age 14. When her parole came up, Marge --- unable to find her a job anywhere else ---took her on as a mother's helper.

"When I was 5 years old, one of my little classmates taught me a word that she said meant my nanny was a different color," Sandy Thurman recalled. "I'd never heard the word; I didn't know what it meant, and I didn't know it was bad. So I went home that day, and I called my nanny a nigger."

Telling the story, Thurman's eyes pooled with tears. "The look on her face. . . . She cried. When I realized I'd hurt my nanny, I was hysterical. When Mother realized what had happened, she had to call Dad to come home and deal with all of us. When we all calmed down, I told them I would never go back to that school. And give my parents credit: Even though I was only 5 years old, they never made me."

When Thurman tells the story, she portrays herself merely as stubborn. State Rep. Jim Martin (D-Morning-

side), who knew mother and daughter, sees instead a young girl who already had absorbed her family tradition.

"What's so effective about Sandy is that she realizes the issues of the AIDS epidemic aren't new issues," he said. "Her commitment is a long commitment to human rights and human dignity, and people who are sick with AIDS are the latest group to be discriminated against."

New goal in time of sorrow

Sandy Thurman, an only child, swore she would never go into the family business; not her mother's law practice or her father's clothing manufacturing, but the real family business of politics.

She got a liberal-arts degree from Mercer University, worked in prison counseling and health care, married Clutter and did volunteer fund-raising for the March of Dimes and the Atlanta Ballet. And then, in little more than a year, her father, her mother, her grandmother, her nanny and her best friend all died.

The cumulative trauma sent her life round a sharp turn. She cast about for something meaningful to do; when friends began to die of AIDS, she found it.

She began delivering meals and keeping patients company. She had nursed her father through cancer at home; the dirty details of serious illness were familiar to her.

"I have been on the front lines," she said. "I have taken care of patients, I have been with mothers when children died in their arms, I have been at more deathbeds than I can ever count. I never forget that."

Tony Braswell inherited the leadership of AID Atlanta not long after Thurman left. "The best way that you learn about AIDS is to live it, and Sandy lived this disease," he said.

In the early '80s, Thurman began fund-raising for AID Atlanta, which was understaffed and \$200,000 in debt. Clutter, amicably divorced from Thurman in 1982, recalls how quickly she immersed herself in AIDS activism. His business partner, close to both of them, had been one of the first of their friends to go.

"Early on, there was such a sense of futility: You'd wonder who would be next to die," he said. "It scared me ---but it energized Sandy."

Thurman became public affairs director in 1988 and executive director in 1989. She helped start the AIDS Walk and ArtCare, two major Atlanta fund-raising events. By the time she left, in 1993, the group had a staff of 90 and a budget of \$4 million.

She did it in part by relying on the sucker-punch combination of Southern polish and political savvy.

"I actually once had a guy say to me, 'What's a nice girl like you doing in work like this?' " she said. "And I said to him, because I needed his signature on something, 'Mr. Senator, I started as a volunteer. I was raised on a long tradition of volunteer service, and I'm sure your family was, too.' And he was fine with that. And I knew he would be."

Debate over needle exchanges

Thurman inspires allegiance. Last summer, she spoke at the National Gay and Lesbian Medical Association's annual meeting in Atlanta.

The applause was cut by a chant that swept the assembly: "Needle exchange now! Needle exchange now!"

As the noise increased, a shaven-headed man in black jeans and a fruit-bedecked cocktail hat climbed on a chair to yell: "We don't mean you, Sandy, honey. We know you're with us."

Needle exchanges have been Thurman's toughest challenge so far.

Studies show that providing free clean needles can reduce HIV infection in addicts and their sexual partners, who account for at least one-third of HIV infections.

When she was named to the job, Thurman publicly supported exchanges, even though Congress outlawed federal funding for them.

Then, for a while, she seemed to soft-pedal. "In my current position, there are a variety of factors I have to take into account; I can't just come out and say I think this is a great idea," she said a few months after taking the job.

But insiders say she engineered the defeat of a proposal to strip the secretary of Health and Human Services of the authority to allow exchanges once certain conditions are met.

"It isn't Sandy's fault the ban on funding for exchanges hasn't been lifted," said Dr. Arthur Ammann, president of the American Foundation for AIDS Research. "She's presented a very clear message to the secretary and the president that this has to be a priority," he said.

Friends say there is little chance Thurman has changed her views. "She'll pick her times and targets," said Ken Britt, executive director of the law firm of Alston & Bird and the current board chairman of AID Atlanta.

And just last week, she sounded ready to take the issue public once again. Congress has imposed a six-month moratorium before any needle swaps may start.

Thurman's response: "We can't stand by and indulge ourselves in petty politics when people are dying."

A 24-hour-a-day job

Thurman has won deep loyalty in part because she seems inexhaustible ---in political work, and on the rare occasions when she allows herself to have fun. "Sandy took me out one year to Hotlanta," Shriver said. "She took me to this party, and that party; she was still going strong, but I had to throw in the towel."

Confirms Braswell: "She can be at a drag show at the Armory until 4 a.m., and be ready to meet the board of Coca-Cola the next morning."

Thurman is drawing deeply on her energy resources these days. The AIDS czar's office is widely considered to be both underfunded and understaffed.

Though she has some help ---a policy person, a press person and some staff ---the position's impact comes down to Thurman: her personality, her Rolodex, and her ability to keep going in the face of opposition.

"I think this is all she can handle right now," Clutter said. "This movement is her lover, and it's a jealous one. It would be very hard to compete with."

Thurman inadvertently confirms that.

"There have been nights I was so tired I never went home," she said in her Washington office. "I fall asleep on this couch, get up, go home to take a shower, and come back again."

"I'll do this as long as I can humanly stand it ---or get fired, whichever comes first."