

# [The Culture of AIDS]

## Monster Plan

A Comic Book Geared to Kids Takes on AIDS

by Jack Hawkins

The battle against AIDS is fought daily by heroes from all walks of life, but thanks to Thomas Perez and Juan Baez, a team of superheroes has joined the fight.

Perez and Baez have created *Team GK and the Monster Plan*, a comic book geared towards raising HIV/AIDS awareness in young children twelve and under, where lessons about AIDS and life can grow deeper roots.

"The story's got to be entertaining," says Baez, the art director for Team Great Kids. "We could've written an informative essay, but if kids didn't find the material engaging, they wouldn't learn anything."

A typically fantastic superhero story embeds the facts and lessons inside the material—a diverse group of children are adopted by secret agents and live in the Great Kids Children's Home, where they develop a telepathic bond among themselves in addition to their various superpowers, such as flight and enhanced vision.

In reality, their evolution was just as interesting. Thomas Perez, president of Teddi Toys, originally created Team GK in 1999 as a line of individual dolls with ethnic backgrounds. His intention was to produce characters with unique stories that would open educational doors for social illnesses. The doll line became an issue of controversy, and after working with his artistic staff, the superheroes of Team GK emerged.

"I decided to unify them telepathically," says Perez, "so they could, as a team, learn to put aside their ethnic differences, to communicate as a team and to fight different social illnesses. And of course today, AIDS is a global pandemic that's both social and medical in scope—a worthy cause for Team GK."

In *Team GK and the Monster Plan*, the team's nemeses, Queen Eriu and Druid, create a monster from a virus that has no cure. During the ensuing battle, Team GK is assisted by a holographic guardian who

provides medical facts to help the fight.

On the surface, this is basic superhero fare, but a deeper look reveals the creators' thoughts about AIDS and their calculated artistic direction.

For instance, energy is used to battle the AIDS monster. "Using huge amounts of pharmaceuticals to battle the monster was unrealistic and unimaginative, in our opinion," says Baez. "Energy is relevant to the future of AIDS combat, specifically energy in the form of light. We looked at the UV therapies being done and added that element to the story because the 'light' factor also added to our theme of enlightenment and education."

Additionally, a team of medical doctors and experts was consulted so that the information provided by the holographic guardian was accurate.

The combination of roller-coaster storylines and educational facts has gotten Team GK noticed. The comics are serialized in the *AHR News*, a newsletter provided by the Asian Harm Reduction Network, serving Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Perez hopes this is just the beginning for Team GK. "I had a gentleman come into my office and tell me what a great idea Team GK was, and that he thought he could help pay back society in his home country of Puerto Rico with the comics. He bought a thousand copies, had them translated into Spanish, and he's having them shipped to interested schools. That's the kind of impact and initiative we're looking for. The goal of the comics is to educate, but also to inspire."

"Team GK opens the doors of education



Thomas Perez and Juan Baez

for parents and teachers," Perez adds. "Children are becoming intellectually active at an earlier age, and Team GK provides a platform for discussion and education about tough social issues. As for AIDS, children are sexually active much earlier in today's world, so we're trying to precede that sexual awakening with solid AIDS discussion and education.

The comic isn't the end-all—parents and teachers must use the comic to open up important discussions."

Perez maintains a long-term vision for his superheroes. "Down the road, I'd love to see Team GK in classrooms. I'd love to see the comics help discussions blossom. I could definitely see Team GK addressing the machinations of the tobacco industry, or a comic called *Team GK and the Energy Pirates*. While on the surface it looks like the energy problem can't be solved by a bunch of grade-schoolers, who knows what will happen if they grow up more energy-conscious? We're a small company, but in the future, perhaps we'll pick up a licensing partner or find a way to get wider distribution—then we'll see what happens. The possibilities of Team GK's path and impact are as wide open as the future itself, which is why the project is so fulfilling."

To follow the adventures of Team GK, visit [www.teamgkheroes.com](http://www.teamgkheroes.com), or e-mail [info@teamgkheroes.com](mailto:info@teamgkheroes.com) for more information.

Jack Hawkins resides in Chicago, Illinois, where he pursues innovative approaches to AIDS and HIV, and strives to see those ideas in print.