A Higher Education

Teaching others about HIV can be a healing experience

January 1, 2006 By Stephanie Fairyington

Two years ago, Tom Donohue tested positive—and his reaction was typical: The Penn State University student, then 23, says he was “overwhelmed” with grief. “I was so emotional at the doctor’s office that people probably thought someone died,” Donohue adds. “And part of me did die that day.”

During the next few weeks, Donohue fell into a deep depression, common among the newly diagnosed, and quit school. But he didn’t stay down for long. Two months after testing positive, he walked through an AIDS quilt display at a Penn State World AIDS Day event. Moved by the lives remembered on quilt panels, Donohue saw an opportunity to tell his own tale, hoping he’d help others understand the risk of HIV at the university. With no public-speaking experience, he took to the stage at the event and nervously told his story to a gathering crowd of students. “I just talked about my diagnosis,” says Donohue. “I gave them the timeline for how it happened. People thanked and hugged me.” Donohue’s warm reception inspired him to found Who’s Positive (www.whospositive.org), an HIV educational youth organization.

He discovered he had the power to move a crowd. Four days after he spoke at Pennsylvania’s Lock Haven University, the campus Wellness Center was swamped with students requesting HIV tests—and exhausted the supply. “His message hit home,” says Max McGee, director of the Wellness Center.

Donohue realized his own outlook had improved, like that of most HIVers who become educators. Studies in 2000 and 2002 showed that HIV positive people who become peer educators learn to cope with their diagnosis. “It’s empowering,” says Dale Brashers, PhD, the author of both studies. “Sharing their experiences allows them to provide support to others and gives positive meaning to their experience.” And you needn’t be an HIV expert to change yours or others’ lives. Simple testimony does the trick. The only homework: learning to feel better.

Talking Heads

Where to unleash your inner teacher

Ask your local AIDS service organization if it offers a speakers’ bureau or educational speaking opportunities for volunteers. At the head of the class:

Hope’s Voice
An organization for positive youth who speak to others about HIV
415.552.4677
www.hopesvoice.com

Women Alive
A Los Angeles organization for women with HIV that provides educational speaking opportunities and nationwide referrals.
323.965.1564
www.women-alive.org

Black Aids Institute
A Los Angeles organization that helps people promote HIV awareness in the black community.
213.353.3610
www.blackaids.org

National Association of People with AIDS (napwa)
Offers leadership-training programs throughout the year to help folks get involved in education and activism.
240.247.0880
www.napwa.org

Campuspeak
An organization representing professional and experienced public speakers about topics (including HIV) for high schools and colleges.
303.745.5545
www.campusspeak.com

HIV educators share their life lessons

“Educating others about HIV and what it’s like to live with the disease, makes me take a good hard look at myself and what the purpose of my actions are.”

—Brian Morgan, 36, Columbia, SC; Diagnosed: 1998

“Working with patients has given me much information about health care and made me vigilant about my own health—especially the importance of adherence.”

—Sandra Benns, 46, Baltimore, MD; Diagnosed: 1998

“Because of my experiences as an educator, I am empowered to demand better treatment and services from physicians for those living with HIV.”

—Torrance Hucks, 38, Washington, DC; Diagnosed: 1992

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