A Woman Under the Influence

How a good fella put a spin on her virus

April 1, 1999 By River Huston

The man moved out and The Man moved in. That's right, the Donnie Brasco of the HIV community is shacking up in the next room. If you want to know how my good friend and fellow *POZ* columnist, Bronx native Mike DeStefano, wound up here in New Hope, Pennsylvania, read his column in the February issue. I'll just say that some time ago we had a blind date that became so much more.

Living with Mike is a combination of waking up to a stand-up comedy show each morning (as long as he takes his Prozac) and having an ongoing support group in my home. Whether he's doing an imitation of Joe Pesci as a recovering alcoholic or reminding me for the umpteenth time that we are more than our disease, he makes me laugh. Thanks to him, I let go of some of my staunch resentments and have come to see how funny they are. For instance, I used to hate being called an AIDS victim, but, hey, you wouldn't call someone who was in a car accident a person living with a car accident, would you?

Breakfast with Mike consists of oatmeal, cappuccinos and tips on how to view my diagnosis as a multifunctional tool (but not a "gift"). Though I've never been one to think of HIV as anything other than a disaster, and I certainly won't admit that it might have helped me move faster and farther up the road to happiness, through my talks with Mike I've come to realize that it's not the actual virus that has changed my life but the realizations that came along with it.

First it was like a searchlight shining on the board of directors in the back of my head—those guys who'd tell me that I was fat and ugly, untalented, tits too small, I won't get the job and I should just die. The light eventually morphed into a neutron bomb, and I nuked the bunch of 'em. Then it catapulted me into another spiritual universe, where I had to rehabilitate how I viewed myself and the world without the constant chatter—"Nice outfit. House on fire? No mirrors?" Now I've got Mike to say those things to me. His one drawback? He tends to be a little *too* honest sometimes. Like the time I got all dressed up and he pointed out that I could use my outfit as a safe-sex device.

Though at first I thought I was helping Mike realize his dreams by offering him enrollment in River's Self-Improvement School, it has since become a two-way street. His presence reminds me of how much dedication it takes to accomplish something you care about. He left his friends, relocated 2,000 miles, moved into a tiny room, had no job or money, took huge risks in front of a

lot of people, listened to criticism and then went out and did it again. He never said no, even when exhausted. There was no immediate payoff but he stuck with it, and now his wildest dreams wake him up in the morning. I have always downplayed the price I've paid to have a successful life, and Mike has been like a mirror for me to see what hard work it takes.

When I was handed a death sentence nine years ago, I went through all the described stages—denial, shock, anger, sadness, acceptance. But it didn't stop there, it kept going—denial, acceptance, shock, anger, acceptance, denial denial, denial, shock, anger. These days I'm just plain bitter—and busy.

I often work 20 hours a day nonstop for weeks—juggling my writing, painting, lectures and various other creative projects—which causes my doctors and friends to freak out because they're afraid I'll make myself sick. People are always telling to me to relax, but I don't. I like doing 15 things at once, thank you very much.

I've simply learned to schedule my illness as best I can. For instance, if it's an IV day, I stay in and paint; if I have to travel, I schedule a night flight to sleep off the side effects; if I'm weak, I don't beat myself up because I can't go to the gym, I just do some yoga or chi gong; and if I'm depressed, instead of heading for the Oreos, now I knock on Mike's door.

There's a surreal quality to my conversations with Mike. We're like the last two soldiers trading war stories. We've both lost everyone dear to us, and it blows our minds that with the new and future drugs we might end up as people who survived AIDS. To be able to share—and laugh about—this with someone who needs no explanation is a bonus.

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