Accidental Activist

Laurie loves Baltimore, basketball and boys on bikes

May 1, 1996 By Rawley Grau

Laurie is perched on the sofa like some graceful seabird. We are in the cluttered, cozy family room of her home in northeast Baltimore, and she is telling me about the on-the-job accident that made her an activist.

In 1991 she was working at an herb farm in the rolling countryside of central Maryland. “I was cutting flowers one day and I cut myself real bad. My boss ran up to me with some 1950s-style first aid.”

It is easy to imagine Laurie working with herbs and wildflowers. Long-legged and slender, in a tan and blue plaid flannel shirt and torn-knee blue jeans, she possesses the kind of fresh, back-to-nature beauty of the early 1970s, a beauty made even more striking by her liquid green eyes and a long cascade of thick, nut-brown hair.

Before the accident at the herb farm, the only people who knew her HIV status were her parents and two close friends. But she felt the accident compelled her to tell her boss. Two days later, Laurie lost her job.

“You’re a modern-day problem in an old-fashioned business,” her boss told her.

Laurie filed a lawsuit against the family-run business, but, “paranoid about the publicity,” she quickly settled out of court for little more than two weeks pay. The experience left her feeling hurt, used and angry.

“That was what got me to speak out about AIDS,” she says. “It made me reach into myself and find the strength to go forward. It made me blossom.”

Today, at 31, having lived with the virus for more than six years (last year, she had a bout with PCP and developed abscesses on her ovaries, possibly HIV-related), Laurie works with the AIDS program of the National Basketball Players Association, organized through the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in the wake of Magic Johnson’s disclosure. The job takes Laurie around the country, holding sessions with NBA players -- and, separately, with their wives and girlfriends -- about how the virus is and isn’t spread, and about combating discrimination against people living with HIV. She has also helped design the curriculum and training for the NBPA’s Winning Against

AIDS program, in which pro basketball players take AIDS education to inner-city kids at basketball camps.

A critical part of her message, Laurie realizes, lies simply in who she is -- a white, middle-class young woman with AIDS. Often she'll refrain from telling the people in her sessions about her HIV status until they have talked about the kind of people who are likely to get infected. Then, after all the old stereotypes have surfaced, she'll announce: "On May 13, 1990, I tested positive for HIV" -- and watch their jaws drop. She lets them know she became infected through unprotected sex and, like most of them, thought it could never happen to her.

But even as she acknowledges the impact her race and gender have on her message, she regrets the way identity issues have divided the affected communities: "I fear that if we keep separating more and more into different groups, we'll lose the common fight for funding and for rights for people living with HIV," she says.

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Sitting across from Laurie in an armchair, a handsome, broad-chested man of 38 with shoulder-length light-brown hair, watches attentively as his wife talks about her work.

Laurie and Steve first met about a year and a half ago and then again at Bike Week in Daytona Beach, Florida. (He rides a Harley; she has a thing for motorcycles.)

"And he knew my HIV status!" Laurie says.

Steve, who is HIV negative, did know her status, but it didn't deter him. "There was just this wonderful light in her."

In July, he proposed, and on September 16, 1995, the couple was married in a pavilion in the middle of the woods at Emory Grove, an old Methodist revival center. They were married "before God, friends and family" -- but not before the state; Laurie didn't want to get a marriage license "out of fear of Steve losing everything" to her high medical expenses.

Losing anything, however, is hardly part of Laurie's plan. Passion, on the other hand, is. The passion to live life to its fullest. And this is, perhaps, what shapes her somewhat different take on Magic Johnson's much-heralded return to pro basketball. "It's not a statement about Magic being HIV positive," she says. "Magic's coming back because he's Magic Johnson and he plays unbelievable basketball and he's following his passion."

And that's exactly what Laurie's doing. She's fishing and crabbing along the Chesapeake, riding the Harley in rural Baltimore County, taking advantage of the "lubricant and condoms in every room" of their house and of course, passionately fighting discrimination. "Isn't that what we're all supposed to do?" she asks. "Find something we care passionately about and go for it?"

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