Acting Up

Tonya Hall tells her story on stage

June 1, 1994 By Steve Doppelt

Tonya Hall still remembers the walk back to her apartment after she was told she was HIV positive and had only two years to live. She saw children laughing in the streets and thought they were laughing at her. She saw people talking and thought they were talking about her. And when she arrived home, she put a cover over her bird's cage so that the animal couldn't look her way.

"Imagine having a Sony Walkman at the loudest volume telling you you're worthless and a horrible person over and over and over," Hall says. "I fantasized about just vanishing off the face of the earth, never to be seen again."

But that was years ago. Today the 29-year-old Hall wants desperately to be seen. And principally, she wants to be heard. Before a rehearsal with the New York City-based AIDS Theater Project, she sits onstage and tells a group of six high school students about the importance of using condoms.

"Life Style has a new one out," she tells them. "You can put King Kong in that bastard and it won't break."

Hall's humor not only helps her get her message through to the students, it also helps her deal with AIDS. She refers to her AIDS-related pills as "foods of the Gods." And when she devours more than 10 of them with one gulp of water, she calls herself "deep throat" and says she has become "the Linda Lovelace of pill-taking. If you don't laugh at some of this shit," she says, "you'll go out of your mind."

There was a time, however, when Hall couldn't laugh. After her HIV diagnosis she turned to alcohol and drugs, which caused intermittent visits to hospitals. Finally, in 1991, she met a doctor who told her that it wasn't AIDS that was killing her, but drinking and drugs.

After that, Hall spent nearly a year at Project Samaritan. She went sober, dropped her abusive boyfriend and was ready to start living. "I feel like I made a deal with God," she says. "He said' if you stay clean and sober, I'll take care of the rest.' And we walked together from there."

Hall's current pace is more like an all-out spring. Though she has had to quit her full-time job, she is currently a board member and frequent speaker for five organizations including Gay Men's

Health Crisis (GMHC), The HIV Law Project and Iris House, which she cofounded. But her favorite organization remains the AIDS Theater Project, where she has been performing since November 1991 and is also a board member.

She and her fellow cast members (all of whom are HIV positive except for a few understudies) are currently rehearsing “This AIDS Thing,” a show based on the actors’ own experiences. The play consists of a variety of scenes and monologues that track the lives of four people living with AIDS.

After the performances, cast memebers field questions from the high school students, allowing Hall plenty of opportunities to use her quick wit. When a student tells her condoms don’t come in his size, she shoots back, “Don’t worry, they come in extra small.”

Hall loves the work because she can see immediate results. Before a performance at a Brooklyn high school, Hall heard one student complaining that he didn’t want to see “another homo play.”

“At the end of the play, he came up and said, ’I called this a homo play, but I learned a lot from it, and I’m sorry,’” Hall remembers. “That, more than anything, makes it all worth it.”

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