Altitude Adjustment

September 1, 2001 By Gale Scott

When Continental Airlines kicked HIVer Michael Barry off a flight in June, causing him to lose thousands of dollars of prescription drugs and personal property, the company joined an elite fleet: American Airlines ejected a PWA from a plane in 1993 and recently refused to hire HIV positive job candidates. And back in 1987, Delta tried to ban all PWAs from the friendly skies but backed down after threats of a gay-community boycott.

The newest chapter opened when Barry, 41, a former teacher from Titusville, Florida, was making a connection in Houston en route to St. Louis to visit his partner's grave. Barry sat down in a Continental wheelchair near the boarding ramp, lost his balance and fell. "I smashed my glasses into my forehead," he says. Bleeding from his head and leg, he staggered to his seat. When a flight attendant tried to help, a harried Barry blurted out, "I have AIDS." Big drama and bigger mistake, he says now. "I felt like it was my responsibility to disclose. But there was hysteria." Panicked passengers were evacuated from the plane, and a crew in plastic suits spent more than two hours cleaning up.

After his cuts were bandaged and his bloody clothes removed, Barry was given a food voucher and directions to the check-in counter -- at TWA. When he tried to reboard the Continental flight, the airline informed him that it had arranged for him to catch a different flight. Pam Pope, a Continental customer-care rep, explained in a letter to Barry that he was denied boarding "not because of your HIV status but because of your inappropriate behavior." No specifics followed. And later, when Barry tried to reclaim his belongings, the cupboard was bare. "These personal items were contaminated by blood and were destroyed," Continental wrote.

For his part, Barry has what he considers a well-justified case of air rage. "Leaving a terminally ill person on the floor with an $8 meal voucher and a ticket on TWA in the middle of Houston International is wrong," he says. And while he has no plans right now to sue, it might be time for fellow HIVers to dust off those boycott wings.

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