Banker’s Hours

Chicago’s Michael Pleasants is just getting started

June 1, 1995 By Amy Feehan

As he approached the table where I sat in Chicago’s Third Coast Cafe, I felt an urge to stand and salute. He had an air of confidence about him, and I could so easily picture him in a military uniform instead of the flannel shirt and sweater he wore. But a warm smile preceeded his firm handshake, and I knew it would be easy to put a name to his face: Pleasants. Michael Pleasants.

A lot of people in Chicago’s HIV community know his name. Pleasants is the president of the board of directors of Test Positive Aware (TPA) Network, the group that publishes *Positively Aware*.

At 28, Pleasants has never been in the armed forces. He works full-time as a commercial banker. But my original impression of him as having a military bearing was not wrong. He’s the son of an army major, a twist of fate which Pleasants says was very lucky for him. “There are certain values that you learn when you are in the army, skills that your parents acquire that get handed down to you,” he says. “There is a resilience you’re forced to develop.”

That skill was first tested when he moved from suburban Denver to Tallahassee in 1984 to attend Florida A&M on an academic scholarship. “I thought, Great, I’ll be going to Miami every other week!” says Pleasants, recalling his youthful naïveté about geography. “But Miami is eight hours away -- I went there twice, I think.” He enjoyed school. He did not enjoy Tallahassee. “Tallahassee is much more like southern Georgia in terms of its attitude and people,” he says, “which is strange because people don’t think of Florida as being the deep South, the Bible Belt.”

Pleasants was not so naïve when it came to HIV. A definite proponent of knowing one’s HIV status, Pleasants had been getting tested about once a year since college. Yet when he found out a friend with whom he had had a sexual relationship had tested positive, Pleasants did not rush to get tested again. He had been laid off from his first job and had no health insurance. Thinking he might be HIV positive, he waited to be tested until he was again working full-time and had good insurance. “I didn’t want anything to come back to haunt me,” he says. Upon testing in 1992, Pleasants found out he was HIV positive.

Pleasants was careful about how he told his parents. Definitely in person. “It was important for my family to see me healthy,” he says, “to have that as a visual picture of someone with HIV.”

It’s important to Pleasants, too. He faithfully takes aerobics class. “If I can keep my body at a

certain standard, or at least perceive it to be that way, then it’s like the disease hasn’t taken control yet,” he says.

He loves to dance and -- even more than a night dancing in the clubs -- Pleasants loves the late-night dining that typically follows. He can tell you the absolute best places for 2 a.m. snacking in Chicago, including his current favorite, a fried shrimp shack just west of Cabrini Green.

Pleasants’ personas as banker and board president might obscure his youth, but he’s keenly aware of it -- especially in light of HIV. “I open up the obituaries and see ages 35, 28, 40, 41,” says Pleasants. “That’s the difficult part.” He compares Marlon Riggs, a brilliant filmmaker who died of AIDS last year at 37, with James Baldwin. “Baldwin produced most of his great works when he was past the age of 60,” says Pleasants. “Who knows what was left for Riggs to produce?” The question hangs in the air as Pleasants sips his iced tea, glances at a handsome passerby and smiles at me. “I feel like I have a lot to give, be it on a grand scale or a minute part.”

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