Baseball, Hotdogs, Apple Pie and HIV

Eagle Scout Henry Nicols likes blondes, cars and “sex on the beach.” Talking with him you wonder: When does a normal young man in extraordinary circumstances become an extraordinary young man?

January 1, 1996 By Casey Davidson

It’s the last weekend of July, in the midst of a mid-summer heatwave. After driving for miles up and down the green hills of the Catskills through tiny, non-descript towns, the signs welcoming baseball fans begin about 10 miles outside of Cooperstown, New York. Rolling farmland slowly turns more populated. Old barns house antiques instead of cows. New motels welcome young sluggers en route. There are ice cream stores, batting cages, miniature golf and a Corvette museum vying for visiting dollars.

The village of Cooperstown, population 2,000, has been invaded by hundreds of families -- dads in baseball hats, T-shirts, long denim shorts and sneakers walk with their dressed-alike sons. They wander along Main Street, past Shoeless Joe’s and a cafe with a “Pete Rose for Commish” banner, toward giant Otsego Lake, stopping to buy souvenirs that mark why they’re here: To celebrate the induction of the Baseball Hall of Fame’s newest members, former Philadelphia Phillies Mike Schmidt and Richie Ashburn.

It’s not baseball that brings me to Cooperstown on the last day of Induction Weekend 1995. As the final event of the ceremony -- a game between the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Chicago Cubs -- is about to begin, a recording of the national anthem blasts out of the speakers from Doubleday Field, just down the road from the Hall.

I walk the few blocks between the stadium and Bassett Hospital, where I will meet Henry Nicols, Sr., who goes by the name Hank and is the father of the Henry with whom I have requested an interview.

Over the phone, Hank gave me somewhat detailed instructions on how to find him at the hospital where he works. “Just go to the information booth. They’ll know how to contact me.” A guard greets me and uses his walkie-talkie to contact Hank. I’m then directed to an office in another building. The whole procedure’s a bit *Mission Impossible* for the country, but I’m curious.

When I finally meet Hank, he tells me the elaborate screening process is intentional. “My visiting with you first was just to make sure you weren’t a nun,” he says. A *what*? Hank explains that well-meaning people, nuns for example, as well as lunatics and other unsavory characters sometimes

try and contact his son, Henry, who has AIDS. “We get threatening letters,” he says, “from people who are well-meaning, but off-center.” Hank’s not crazy, but his statement is puzzling. Later, his wife explains: “There are people out there who believe that AIDS is a punishment from God,” says Joan Nicols. The family tries to protect Henry from the lunatics. And the nuns.

What’s clear is that I’ve traveled the distance between baseball, the most American of pastimes, to AIDS, the most American of diseases. They coexist in Cooperstown in the form of Henry Nicols.

Henry, a lanky kid with a loping gait, walks into his Dad’s office a few minutes later. Henry is a youthful-looking 22-year-old with bright brown eyes, straight light brown hair that is parted on the side, cut short, and hangs over one of his eyes. He’s stylish, not a slacker, and if I were a 22-year-old woman (not 33), I’d think he was a cute boy. Like almost everyone in Cooperstown, he wears long denim shorts, a T-shirt with a Drew University symbol on it and sneakers.

Henry is friendly, warm and smiles easily, but he’s a funny contradiction. If he’s talking about AIDS, the topic is so familiar the information just flows out of him. Some of it sounds almost rehearsed, like a politician with an agenda, but he knows what he’s saying. He’s got the AIDS speeches down pat.

On the other hand, he’s got the shy, geeky, post-teenager thing going on, like Keanu Reeves in those stimulating *Bill and Ted* films. He’s worried about whether he should look me in the eye, or look away, volunteer information, or be quiet. Later, when we’re alone, he talks about the weather, slightly nervously, staring at the mountains. It’s charming in a way that reminds me of my own awkward years.

AIDS arrived in bucolic Cooperstown with a sonic boom in 1991 via Henry, who was then a 17-year-old high school student, a hemophiliac and a Boy Scout. Henry came from a God-fearing, hardworking, close-knit, community-oriented family that fit in so perfectly with the small town ideal that if they didn’t live here already, they’d have to move.

As a hemophiliac, Henry had his share of physical challenges and mishaps growing up, many of which resulted in blood transfusions. From the hundreds of transfusions came HIV and now AIDS. Henry has known he is HIV positive since he was 11 years old, a fact the Nicols family, as a unit, decided to keep a secret.

Henry says that until he was 17, he lived in fear. He listened to the news reports when Indiana teenager Ryan White, who had AIDS, was thrown out of school because other parents didn’t want their children exposed to him, and when the Ray brothers, the three HIV positive hemophiliacs from Florida, had their house burned down and their dog killed. Henry hoped that by keeping AIDS a family secret, he would avoid such heartbreak.

“For so many years we had been hiding it. We’d been biting our tongues, and paranoid every time anybody made a stupid AIDS comment because we were afraid someone would find out,” says Henry spitting out the word “stupid,” and squirming a bit when he talks.

More often than not, secrets breed fear. Did the family suffer psychologically and seek help? Hank says that indeed he found a shrink for the family, but, “he told me to leave Henry alone.” Joan says that “because he was infected, Henry grew up a little faster and was more of a loner than most kids.”

It certainly wasn’t doom and gloom in the Nicols household. Henry had as normal an adolescence as possible, reveling in such things as girls and partying.

“How’s dating?” I ask Henry.

“Well, I am partial to blondes,” he says to me, a proudly bottle-blonde reporter, flirting.

“I’m too old for you,” I say.

Henry laughs.

A bit later, Hank casually mentions that Henry is “dame bramaged” in that nerdy way that fathers everywhere talk, just to embarrass their children. But Henry’s game. This is how the Nicols talk about sex.

Henry: “It sounds kind of sick to say this, but we’re kind of lucky I was infected when I was about 10.”

Hank: “We had him neutered.”

Henry: “My family is kind of strict, so I wasn’t having unprotected sex or using IV drugs at age 10,” Henry says, smiling. “It wasn’t a problem with me infecting anybody.” But AIDS educator Henry quickly eclipses playful Henry as he continues. “It’s very easy to avoid behaviors that put people at risk. This made me and everybody I’ve ever dated realize that there’s more to dating than sex. There are a lot of ways to show someone that you love them without putting them at risk. It’s not as bad as most people think.” Henry finishes on automatic pilot.

As a child, Henry wasn’t rebellious. Nor were his two sisters, says Joan -- mainly because when they were growing up, Hank was a police officer. But Henry did get drunk once. “At about two in the morning, I heard Henry and his best friend Chris being really loud in the hot tub,” remembers Joan, who got out of bed to check out the commotion. “Chris couldn’t get out of the tub, and there was Henry barfing pink barf on the deck.” They’d been drinking a concoction, sex on the beach, with a red tint. The event, says Joan, “was hilarious.”

Henry giggles a bit at the memory, and defends himself. “That was the hot tub’s fault.” Then he turns serious. “Alcohol is bad for an immune system. I do sometimes drink,” he says, “but I don’t get smashed every night.”

Anyway, drinking doesn’t fit in with Henry’s other passion -- Scouting. Joan calls Hank “Mr. Boy Scout” and since Henry was a child, he’s been encouraged as a Scout. Out of that archaic -- some

would even say reactionary -- organization came an AIDS evangelist, a poster child and preacher for the AIDS movement.

Henry achieved Scouting's highest honor, the rank of Eagle Scout. First, he earned 21 merit badges, and then proposed a project demonstrating leadership and serving a community. Says lifelong Scouter and Nicols family friend Bob Hildebrand, "Typically, it involves cleaning up a local park or painting furniture in a community center." Henry isn't typical and his project was simple and courageous: To tell the world about his life with AIDS.

It was a brave move. "Most of the courage came from anger," Henry says, "because I was so tired of having to keep this secret. It's like having to hide the fact that you're Jewish or something totally stupid that you should never have to hide. I was angry at having to keep this secret. Basically, if anyone has a problem with that, then it's their problem. It's not my problem because I am not going to deal with it anymore."

Henry took control of his AIDS destiny in a modern way. He planned a press conference. "We figured it was best to get it out and then it would be old news," says Henry. "But it didn't work out that way. It became huge news, like, instantly." Then Henry's life changed.

First came relief: "After this, it was sort of like you could be yourself now, you could stop living a lie and stop pretending and let people know who you really were," says Henry.

The second part of Henry's Eagle Scout project involved visiting schools and meeting with kids to explain to them what he knew about AIDS in a non-judgmental way. It was so successful that Henry and his sister Jennifer still travel together to colleges, Japan and anywhere else they're asked to go spreading the safer sex gospel. "It makes him feel like he's doing something worthwhile," says Joan. "It keeps him fired up."

"We have a presentation that lasts about 30 minutes and then we do questions and answers. That's the most important part. That's when people ask what they need to know. A lot of high school and college age students think that, basically, you get AIDS and then you just die and that's it. They don't realize that you're still living. A lot of them don't believe that you can get AIDS from someone who looks healthy. We try and blow that out of the water and I think we usually do a pretty good job," says Henry.

He admits that frustration gets to him. "Nobody ever believes they'll get killed in a car accident or by drunk driving and nobody ever believes they'll get AIDS. It's this teenage and young adult sense of invulnerability that is so frustrating because they don't believe that AIDS is where they are. They don't realize that AIDS is everywhere."

I can't help thinking that other than the fact that Henry has AIDS (his T-cell count is zero but when it was a high four, he named them, two boys and two girls, so if they reproduced he could explain it), he's so normal, another kid growing up in a small town anywhere in America.

Although Henry has full-blown AIDS, his health has been remarkably stable with no ongoing

opportunistic conditions; he's avoided being hospitalized since Thanksgiving 1994. "He's a bit of an anomoly because he really looks good," says his father. "He's averaged one hospital stay a year for the last three years. In 1991, he had multiple system failures, and one time we were told he wouldn't make it through the night. It scared the shit out of us. But he bounced back quickly." So how does Henry cope physically? Lots of sleep, says his dad -- up to 16 hours a day.

He's healthy enough to mountain climb and water-ski and babysit for his toddler niece, after all. But Henry reminds me what it's like to be terminally ill. "I've never known anything different," he says. "I've never known what it's like not to be a hemophiliac. I can't remember what it was like not to be HIV positive. It's always been there and it's part of me. There's never a day that goes by that I don't think about it. Almost as long as I can remember, it's been there."

From his pragmatic point of view comes a wise AIDS statesman who has grown increasingly aware of his ability to capitalize on his camera-ready appeal. "People look at me as an innocent victim who wasn't doing anything wrong, who doesn't deserve this. Well, that's frustrating as well: No one deserves this," he says.

Henry is spreading the word beyond mere speaking engagements. After the press conference, the writer Michael Ryan heard about Henry and decided to make a documentary about his life. "I had done magazine articles on AIDS and had friends who had died," says Ryan. "Part of me looked at Henry and said this is propaganda, a way to tell middle America about AIDS." Ryan produced and directed *Eagle Scout*, which aired on HBO this past summer. Within 30 seconds of its first airing, the phone at the Nicols home was ringing with strangers wishing the family well. The film captures the essence of Henry, a good Eagle Scout with a handsome face who just wants to tell people about AIDS. He's a role model.

"I never really thought of myself becoming a role model. It's not something I said as a little kid -- one day I am going to be a role model. It's just something that happened."

A kid with AIDS teaching compassion is a great role model, maybe even better than a baseball player. Maybe Cooperstown really is home to heroes after all.

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