Feel the Burn, Baby

HIV doesn't have to kill your dreams

May 12, 1995 By Evelyn C. White

"It's your thing, do what you wanna do." Just the other day I was listening to an old Isley Brothers tape, and that refrain from their smash hit got me to rocking and to thinking. I'd been feeling beleaguered. Kwanzaa. The Martin Luther King holiday. Black History Month. It seemed as if every African American in the country was calling me up with an *exclusive, never-been-told-before* news story that only I could write. As one of a handful of black reporters at my paper, I'm accustomed to being the "race woman," but I'd hit a wall. Inspired by the soulful words of the Isleys, I decided to just take charge of my life and do what I wanted to do. I requested vacation for all of January and most of February, busy months for black journalists.

As I make plans to travel to Lake Tahoe, it's clear to me that it's a lot easier than we may think to seize the moment. And it works wonders for our health.

"If there's one thing I tell my patients, it's that they'll feel better if they take control of their lives," says Princeton, New Jersey physician Dr. Trissa Baden. "There's not question that reducing stress improves a person's physical and emotional health."

It may take a while to put into practice, but we all have the power to march to our own beat. Witness "Wild Bill" Hinson. About 15 years ago, Hinson, 39, was in the Air Force Reserve and working as an engineer in California's Central Valley. Then it happened.

"I just kept getting fatter and fatter," said Hinson, who is today a muscular, six-foot, 175-pound hunk with sultry black features and honey-colored hair. "I marched right down to the Yand signed up for an aerobics class." Bored by the music, Hinson brought in his boomin' Sylvester tapes. He soon began teaching. "I got up in front of the class and something just came over me," Hinson recalls with a wicked laugh. "I'd dress up in full leather. I'd chase the flabby people around the room with sticks. Pretty soon I had a cult following. My classes kept getting bigger and bigger. That's when I got the nickname Wild Bill."

Now in San Francisco, he was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS in 1990 but hasn't put away his spandex. He teaches nine 40-minute wild and crazy aerobics classes a week. There's a waiting line to get in.

“This man is tenacious,” said Nanette Asimov, a slim, 35-year-old redhead who started working out with Wild Bill five years ago. “I have never seen anyone as determined to live and live well He has been hit by the worst medical problem of this century and yet he continues to give other people good health. I think he keeps going because he’s doing exactly what he wants to do.”

Robert De Andreis, 36, is another man with HIV who say the disease has motivated him to “stop waiting for instructions.” A former teacher who’d kept journals since he was 16, De Andreis transcribed all his diaries, transferring them to computer disks when he went on disability two years ago.

As he was going through his journals, he realized he had a real flair for writing. A friend who worked at *The Sentinel*, one of the gay weeklies in San Francisco, suggested that De Andreis write a column. Today, his witty, outrageous, totally uncensored “HIV Commentary” is among the most widely read columns in the Bay Area newspaper. Among the topics his fans have come to adore are De Andreis’s rantings about his ex-boyfriend Bob and his skewering of AIDS service organizations.

In the past six months, his candid, straight-from-the-crotch commentary has generated more than 2,000 letters. He’s been a guest on talk shows, published a collection of his columns and given public readings to standing-room-only crowds. Sprawled on the couch in front of a huge picture window in his cozy apartment, De Andreis chatted about how writing has changed his life.

“It is cleansing and cathartic,” he said, brushing a hand over the splash of henna that highlights his brown hair. “There is something about writing that keeps me going. It gives me a chance to celebrate and honor my life. All those years when I thought that I was going to live forever, I never did anything. Now people think I’m the toast of the town.”

Psychotherapist Dr. Richard Wagner says the power of De Andreis’s column rests in the fact that De Andreis is clearly enjoying himself “His live-for-the-moment approach is not reflected generally in popular culture. Robert skips past all the stressful ‘woe is me’ stuff.”

With all the societal messages about the importance of being responsible, people have a hard time believing they have the right to chart their own course, Wagner says. But there’s not a better health strategy than embracing life fully—on one’s own terms. Wild Bill Hinson is living proof.

“Sometimes my feet get swollen from KS, but I refuse to stop teaching,” said Hinson as he prepared for another class. “If I doe, it will be on the aerobics floor.”

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