Cyber HIVerite

August 1, 2000 By Chad Kaydo

We've had it with watching bratty college kids play out their issues on TV and the Internet, right? Richard Hollingsworth, 46, has slightly loftier aspirations. In February, he invited everyone to watch him deal with the real HIV world when he launched The AIDS Channel (www.theAIDSchannel.com), a website featuring live video broadcast from three cameras in the house he shares with his wife and five stepchildren in rural Cranbrook, British Columbia. "I don't ever want this disease to be sensationalized or trivialized, because it's horrid," Hollingsworth told POZ. "But I'm hoping to show people that we really are 'normal.' The site puts a face to the disease."

Hollingsworth's five-year tour of Canada as an AIDS educator impressed on him the importance of close encounters of the HIVer kind. "When listeners were able to meet a real person with this disease," he says, "that really impacted them." His up-and-down health made him realize that he might not always be able to travel in person to events.

No stranger to attention-getting measures—last year he put his body up for auction on eBay as a publicity stunt, and he once donated two tablespoons of his blood for use by a local artist—Hollingsworth chose showing off to the global village over early retirement. Now he goes about his dosing regimen (a salvage combo of nevirapine/abacavir/Viracept/d4T), daily work on the site and time spent with the kids—Chris, 17; Geoff, 15; Mathieu, 11; Holly, 10; and Kayla, 7—all in front of the cameras.

His once-lens-shy wife, Phyllis Gauvin-Hollingsworth, has put up with her own share of small-town slander since the couple married in 1997, two years after Rick tested positive. "When people see me, they say, 'That woman's married to someone with AIDS,'" she says. "But we're living a normal life. I have nothing to hide."

Hollingsworth's life wasn't always so buttoned-down, and he is open about his years living on the streets and using cocaine. "I have to fight the disease of addiction just as much as I have to fight HIV," he says, adding that he went back to drugs after he tested positive. (He's been clean now for a year.)

When the kids are at school and Hollingsworth is resting, viewers—about 400 a day—can watch video from an archive of taped AIDS conferences, read his compelling journal entries or pop in on the requisite chatroom. In May, Hollingsworth, who also has hepatitis C, went live with a companion site, www.hcv.theAIDSchannel.com and began working with a Canadian production

company on a documentary about his life that will play in December on China's CCTV—to an audience of 800 million. Proving that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, in June his stepson Chris launched AIDSradio.com, a site that will broadcast four hours of music and HIV education programming for teenagers each week.

Many of the 10-odd hours Hollingsworth puts into the site each day are spent referring requests from viewers about meds or money matters. The AIDS Channel doesn't have advertisers—at least not yet—and he has already gone $300,000 in debt setting up the equipment (sponsors are welcome). A local Internet service provider covers most of the site's costs and a freelance journalist donates time to document Hollingsworth's medical visits. A group of Canadian medical experts, including his own specialist, Brian Conway, MD, posts info on the site, and his pastor, Rev. Owen Abrey, oversees its spiritual content.

Even as his CD4 cell count dips, Hollingsworth is prepared to let the cameras capture whatever happens next. "This website is not about doom and gloom—it's about hope—but there is a pragmatic reality here," he says.

Depending on your point of view, this is all either another one of Hollingsworth's controversial acts or just one of courage. Rev. Abrey believes the latter. "It was said that John the Baptist was a voice crying out in the wilderness," he says. "That is Rick. He's crying out in the wilderness, but being heard around the world."

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