Dances with Wolff

A double life becomes a better life

July 1, 1997 By Becky Minnich

Michael Wolff has always been attracted to the nurturing professions: For 10 years, he was a mental health worker by day and a sex worker by night.

“I wanted to help people, and though working with mentally ill people was incredibly draining, it fulfilled me,” he says. But not entirely. Wolff’s day job didn’t meet all his financial or emotional needs, so -- unbeknownst to his coworkers -- he pursued a double life.

“At first it was about the money, but prostitution is addictive,” Wolff says.“I was trying to fill a void left by the love and affection I didn’t get as a child.” Wolff never came out to his strict, repressive family -- which he describes as “very German” -- either about being gay or testing positive for HIV in 1992.

Though Wolff wasn’t exactly surprised by his diagnosis, he was distressed. “I hid in my room for several days, trying to process what was happening,” he says. “I saw myself dying in a hospital bed somewhere, and I realized that wasn’t whatI wanted.”

Wolff began reading about spirituality, metaphysics and meditation. He was especially drawn to books about near-death experiences and about PWAs who turned the course of the virus around through visualization. “I knew that I would never be in control of my physical health if I wasn’t spiritually healthy as well,” he says. That meant quitting both his day job and his moonlighting gig, which Wolff describes as “toxic on an emotional level.”

Soon he was studying positive visualization techniques and Reiki -- a form of hands-on healing. Next came a course on therapeutic massage in Hawaii, prompted by Wolff’s belief that touch is crucial to the healing process.

“There’s a real need for touch among people with HIV,” says Wolff, who recently opened a massage therapy practice in Vancouver, Canada that specializes in treating people with HIV. “I’ve had clients break down crying on the table, telling me nobody has touched them for years.”

Wolff’s spiritual journey prompted him to realize how much of his life’s energy he had spent on trying to please other people. Take his life-long love of sports -- particularly track and field. “I had always been athletic,” he says, citing the former impetus for his fitness regimen as buns of steel

and devastating pecs designed to attract men. And now? “I go to the gym to feel good and be healthy. As a result I’ve never been in such good shape.”

Despite his doctor’s advice and a CD4 count of 390, Wolff is sticking to a natural-health regimen in lieu of antiretroviral therapy, including protease inhibotors. “I’m feeling great and that’s what’s important -- not numbers on a blood test,” he says.

Clearly it’s working for him: Wolff recently completed the Keaha (Hawaii) half Iron Man triathlon, and half an Iron Man is more than most whole men could handle, requiring a 1.2-mile swim, 56-mile bike and 13.5-mile run. He finished the event in a phenomenal five hours. Says Wolff: “I wanted to show that HIV doesn’t have to stop you.”

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