Doggone It

A tough old broad teaches Shari Margolese and her son how to live

August 1, 2006 By Shari Margolese

We lost the family matriarch tonight. After administering last rites in our home, we stood beside her as she went peacefully in her sleep. We cleaned her and covered her with a blanket. And then, after we hugged her and sobbed good-bye, my husband placed her in the garage. Elsie was 83—in dog years, that is.

Our family (my 13-year-old son and I are HIV positive; my husband is negative) has always had pets. I've treasured the questions only a furry friend can inspire: My son's "Why is the puppy coming out of Elsie's bum?" and "What are those things the puppies are sucking on?" have prompted key life-cycle discussions. But "Why isn't Elsie moving?" was harder to address. I had feared my son's reaction: He'd been around death before (his grandpa and many of my HIV positive friends have died) but was just starting to fully grasp its link to his having HIV, a topic I dread discussing with him even more than I did sex and its special risks for him and his future partners.

Elsie, a cockapoo, went downhill quickly; she had failing kidneys and couldn't eat, drink or go outside. We could have put her on life support, put her down or cared for her until the final woof. I hadn't considered life-ending options since I prepared a living will after my HIV diagnosis, in 1993. For most people, a living will is a formality; but for me, it loomed as an ominous reality. But I'm glad I wrote one. My friends and family now know I want life support only if I have a reasonable chance of survival. They don't have to decide anything. As I explained to our son, "People can decide for themselves how to live the end of their lives, but we have to decide for Elsie." He said, "If I was Elsie, I wouldn't want to be alone." As he spoke, I couldn't help hearing him tell me that he wouldn't want to be alone if he were dying. Nor do I when my time comes, whether from HIV or boring old age. "You'll never be alone," I promised.

When I asked my brother for Elsie advice, he said, "If she's making a mess all over the house, why don't you put her down?" I retorted, "Would you put me down just because I missed a few trips to the bathroom?" He said he wouldn't, but I mentally filed his response. HIV makes you appreciate life wherever, however you live it. My 5-year-old nephew was more insightful, suggesting that we "put her in a rock like Uncle Mike," whose ashes are entombed in granite. Instead, I heeded my dear husband and son, both of whom said we should "keep her home, where she will be loved. We can handle it." Overcome with relief, I realized that at least they'd be there for me one day.

Elsie lasted only a couple of days in our makeshift hospice. “I feel sad, Mom, just real sad,” my son said at the end. “I think I could have done more.” I explained that she was very old and very sick and there was nothing more anyone could have done. As tears welled up in his eyes, he added, “Yes, there is, Mom. I could have spent more time with her.” My heart melted, and I, too, fought back tears. While I was trying to teach my son an unspoken lesson about dying with HIV, he had just taught me how to *live* with HIV.

I vowed at that moment to spend more time with my family. As I fought to regain my composure, my son broke the silence. Recalling a pet bunny we’d lost in the winter, when the frozen ground forbade a backyard burial, he glared at me. “Dad didn’t put Elsie in the freezer, did he?”

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