Editor’s Letter

Making Waves

April 1, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

When I heard that Caleb Glover, an Alabama 3- year-old, had been banned last summer from an RV park swimming pool for being HIV-positive, I was enraged. It was 2007! How many decades of HIV-positive people swimming safely with others would it take for people to understand that there is no risk of infecting anyone else in the water?

Watching Caleb’s adoptive parents tell their story on *Good Morning America* was like watching the Ryan White story all over again. Ryan was diagnosed with AIDS at 13 and became internationally famous for fighting fellow students, their parents and the school administration—who all wanted to expel him. Wrestling with the Glover outrage, I tried to convince myself that we shouldn’t blame people who don’t understand the facts about HIV for trying to “protect” themselves. After all, it took me 10 years to become comfortable with HIV. I don’t expect people encountering HIV for the first time to be immediately at ease. But this was outright discrimination—and I wanted to race down to Alabama and give the people who hadn’t bothered to learn the facts about HIV transmission a crash course.

That’s exactly what activists from the Campaign to Ends AIDS did. Rallying at the RV park, they helped the folks in Alabama get their AIDS facts straight. When Charles King, mastermind of the Campaign to End AIDS, carried Caleb into the water, several vacationers jumped into the pool and joined them in solidarity. The spectacle of HIV-negative people who had never met a positive person bobbing around among activists wearing hiv positive T-shirts was a sight for my very sore eyes.

People armed with the medical facts about HIV can get their heads around it—and their arms around us. Take Silvia and Dick Glover, Caleb’s adoptive parents. They discovered his HIV status when they took their new baby to the hospital to be treated for an abscess and pneumonia. It never occurred to Silvia and Dick not to keep Caleb. Unfazed, the Glovers asked their church to pray for him. Soon after, some children were not allowed to play with him. It was the first of many times that the Glovers would encounter AIDS stigma.

Our other cover boy, Jack Mackenroth, has swum upstream for other reasons. A swimmer since youth, and open about his positive status, he has never been banned from the pool, let alone ostracized for being HIV positive. In fact, he was put on a national reality TV show (*Project*

Runway) despite—or perhaps even because of—his HIV status. But when he developed a staph infection, unrelated to HIV, and had to leave the show because he was immediately contagious to other people, it seemed a strange irony. A show that had no problem embracing Jack and his HIV had to watch him depart when he developed an entirely different condition.

Mackenroth then dedicated himself to serve, like Caleb, as an educational example, showing people not only that HIV-positive people aren't dangerous to others, but that they can be pictures of health—even when recovering from other serious diseases.

Bridging gaps of generation, race and background, these two Aquamen are proof that education and awareness can banish discrimination. But the fact that they and so many others living with HIV must continually take a stand against misperception speaks to a flood of ignorance that must be dammed, once and for all.

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