Editor’s Letter

Back on the Horse

January 1, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

When I saw the cover photograph for this issue, I was struck by two things—the beauty of the children and the odd irony of the horses beside them. Soon after we started working on the issue, in early November, my horse fell on me and broke my ankle. I’ve been riding for 34 years—it was just one of those silly accidents. One moment, my horse was trotting quietly in the ring; the next, he shied and tripped. Suddenly we were falling together. After three decades in the saddle, I’ve had my share of spills and broken bones. I know how to tuck and roll, and little scares me anymore. But as I hit the ground, my foot still in the stirrup, I was very afraid. I lay on my back watching my horse fall, praying that he wouldn’t roll all the way over as he hit the ground—and crush me. His weight snapped my ankle, but my scream sent him scrambling to his knees, sparing the rest of my bones.

Ever since I was a kid, my parents have warned me about the dangers of competitive riding. I know it’s been hard for them to stand on the sidelines over the years and watch me on seemingly countless horses, thundering around courses, galloping in all sorts of weather over all sorts of jumps. Somewhere along the line they accepted that the joy I get from the horses overshadows the occasional injury. My horses have been with me throughout my entire time with HIV. Their unconditional love, the tactile pleasure I get from grooming them—the strength riding brings to my body and mind and the feeling of freedom and power I have when sailing over a jump at 30 mph on my horse’s back—far outweigh the annoyance of my cast and crutches.

So although I am not yet a parent myself, I can image how hard it is to watch your children make decisions that involve risk. That’s exactly what Suzan Stirling, HIV positive herself, had to do when her 17-year-old HIV-positive daughter, Alee, told her that she wanted to go public with her HIV status. Suzan was worried that disclosure, though freeing, could in some circumstances bring more pain than joy to her daughter’s life. My own mom and I went through that when I told her I was going to tell the world my status. Her maternal instincts kicked in when I said I was ready to take that huge jump. For me the decision—which has not been without a certain amount of fallout—was absolutely the right one, and it has made my life a thousand times more joyful.

I hope that people applaud the bravery of the Stirlings as I hope people all over the world compassionately support those HIV-positive people who decide to share their status. Those who do can certainly challenge the world’s view of what HIV is and looks like. When the ambulance crew

picked me up at the barn after my fall, they asked whether I had any other health concerns. I told them I’m HIV positive. The medic paused a second (he was touching my ankle with gloved hands) and said, “OK, don’t worry; we’ll make sure they don’t broadcast that information around the ER.” I looked at him and said, “Don’t worry; the world already knows.” He stared at me incredulously, and I lay back on the gurney with a huge sigh, marveling at how sometimes big risks can bring even bigger relief.

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