Father Figures In

Morris Freed dances toward his aging father

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Morris Freed never had much in common with his dad. While Morris loved music and dance, John Freed dreamed his son would settle down and take over the family hardware store. As Morris grew up, it was not so much that he and his father had a bad relationship. They didn't have much of a relationship at all.

Two years ago, after Morris' mother died, that began to change. After more than a decade of living with HIV and years of guilt about the gulf between them, Morris decided he had to reach out to his father. The night he told his then-80-year-old father he had AIDS marked a sudden and radical change in their relationship. Now it seemed they had something important in common: An acute awareness of their own mortality.

These days, when 41-year-old Morris complains about aching muscles or the slow grumble in his digestive tract, his father is the most sympathetic ear around. They speak on the phone almost daily.

"We share a sense of humor about death and about the things we can't do anymore -- things he can't do because of age, and I can't do because of AIDS," Freed says. "I'm still in awe over the change in our relationship."

As a child, Morris never saw much of his dad. Morris and his twin brother spent most of their free time in the basement, amusing each other with their shared love of music and dance.

As soon as he was old enough, Morris set out on his own. After dropping out of college in upstate New York in favor of scouring Manhattan for a dance position, he landed an understudy spot with *A Chorus Line*'s touring company. During his years on the road, Morris performed in cities from Topeka to San Jose. Then he was fired by the notoriously mercurial creator of the show, Michael Bennett, who decided his performance was not up to snuff. A year later, Morris was rehired, this time for the Broadway production. "It's an inside joke with the cast: You have to get fired from the touring company in order to get to Broadway," Freed says.

During those years, Morris and his dad saw each other once or twice a year. John never came to see his son in New York City, and Morris rarely went home.

The elder Freed still lives in the same lakefront house in the far suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee where Morris grew up. The newly forged bond between father and son has given both a new sense of purpose.

Morris doesn't think he has much longer to live. "When I get ready to die, I want you here with me in New York," he told his father recently. John promised he would be on the first plane out of Nashville.

"All his life he has been doing his own thing," John says, watching a University of Tennessee football game. "He never needed me for anything. He needs me now."

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