Friend of Tinky

Brett Beasley wrote letters, made calls, even posed nude to get his cousin Jerry Fallwell's attention. No dice. This was an HIV outing made for Michael Musto.

June 1, 2000 By Michael Musto

Jerry Falwell's been trying to angle his way into the gay community's better graces lately, but he's drawn the line at reaching out to his cousin Brett Beasley, who's an abomination before the Lord -- and a really great guy. The 39-year-old Beasley, who works as a sales consultant for an e-business software developer in Raleigh, North Carolina, came out of the closet to much brouhaha last year as an antidote to his gay-dissing cousin's campaign to demonize Tinky Winky as a Lavender Menace. Falwell responded by turning the other cheeky weeky and claiming he didn't know Beasley from Adam (or Steve), though he generously allowed that he was praying for the guy. Well, the reverend had better brace himself because Beasley is dropping a new bombshell: He has HIV -- what Cousin Jerry has called "the wrath of God upon homosexuals."

"I'd been tested on an annual basis for years and been negative," Beasley told *POZ* on a recent visit to New York City. But when he came back from a trip to Buenos Aires last year sick with jaundice, fatigue and weight loss, his doctor ran tests. "He called me a week later," recalls Beasley, "and said, 'I've got some bad news and some really bad news.'" Beasley had acute hepatitis A -- and he also happened to be HIV positive. You'd think being Jerry Falwell's second cousin was bad enough.

Testing positive is the latest in Beasley's whirl of high-profile challenges and controversies, all in rapid-fire succession. The Tinky Winky debate exploded while Beasley was creating his own to-do by posing nude in the March 1999 issue of *Men* under the pseudonym Gordy Miller ("I worked hard on my body all my life, so why not share it? And they paid me. Does that mean I'm Jezebel?"). When a tabloid gossip column revealed Beasley's ID, *The Advocate* approached him to come out with a bang; this story proved irresistible to those of us thrilled to learn not only that Jerry's cousin was a sister but that homophobia apparently is not genetic. The irony! The texture! And he's single! "But when Jerry told them he didn't know who I was," Beasley recalls, "that really pissed me off. I was like, 'You know exactly who I am, and you know I'm gay too.' I've known I was gay since right after I was born, and my own family's been very accepting. I mean, I don't see it as 'I've got to stick a Lambda flag in everybody's face.' But I have a responsibility to myself and other gay people to challenge Jerry about his homophobic statements."

Beasley, an outgoing type in a black Armani pullover shirt and blue jeans, doesn't hesitate to talk about his illness or anything else. Never at a loss for words, he projects a pragmatic directness,

countering all potential problems with a refreshingly controlled sense of reason and a dash of camp. Once he got over the hepatitis, he says, he started an AZT/3TC/ddI cocktail (his CD4s were 350, his viral load 300,000), which caused peripheral neuropathy in his feet. Beasley immediately switched the ddI for d4T -- and the “tingling, burning and numbness” of neuropathy for a whole new set of side effects, which are not as bad. “I’ve had flu-like symptoms, but things are looking pretty good with this cocktail,” he says. With each raised glass comes a toast to life’s new priorities. “Living in the present” is Beasley’s top goal, along with freeing himself of negativity. “I’ve become more sensitive to other people,” he says, “and maybe not as critical. Until you can walk in someone’s shoes, you shouldn’t try to judge them.” (Of course, we still love to judge Falwell, mainly because he started the whole thing.)

But don’t judge Beasley. He says that he always practiced what he thought of as safe sex, going to lengths to be selective and careful. “Finding out I was positive was a total shock to me,” he says. “I’d never even swallowed cum.” He now believes that oral sex presents more risk than some might be willing to face. If he could do a Cher and turn back time, “I’d err on the side of being protective of myself as opposed to listening to the rhetoric that giving a blow job is not how you contract HIV.”

Asked how he would answer “You should have known better,” he says: "Firstly, I’d say, ’Mind your own business.’ Secondly, ’The only way to have *completely* safe sex is to abstain or stay home and masturbate.’ And thirdly, ’What difference does it make at this point?’“ As if citing chapter and verse from the empowered-patient bible, he says, ”I don’t look at it as ’Oh, woe is me. I’m gonna get AIDS and die.’“ He researches, surfs the web, questions his doctor. ”If you don’t get a satisfactory answer,“ he says, ”get a second opinion. Doctors aren’t gods.“ One thing Beasley knows for sure is that he aims to keep his virus undetectable (or close to it -- he’s now at 4,000 viral load, 450 CD4s) in more ways than one. ”This whole HIV thing is so present in my mind. It’s the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing before I go to bed,“ he says wearily. ”I want it to be secondary, a more rudimentary part of my life."

The Jerry Falwell connection, however, never goes away. For the record, Jerry’s mom, Helen Beasley Falwell, was Beasley’s father’s mother’s sister -- Beasley’s great-aunt. Falwell presided over the funeral of Beasley’s grandmother, and broke bread with him at many family get-togethers. Jerry knows Brett.

But not all Christian families are alike. While Jerry is a dyed-in-the-wool conservative Baptist, Beasley and his five siblings were raised in an open-minded Lutheran household. Since his dad, Linton, was in the military for 21 years, “I spent most of my childhood abroad” -- the former actor-dancer-singer-model-waiter pauses a beat -- “I don’t mean as a woman, I mean overseas. As children, we were exposed to a lot of different cultures. I’d lipsync to the Supremes, dress up Ken dolls in Barbie’s clothes and I quit football for ballet. I told my mom I was gay in junior high school and she was like, ’OK, tell me something I don’t know.’” Was God so nonchalant? “It helped me growing up to know that God loves me unconditionally and I’m a good person,” he says. “I don’t think God singles people out for punishment.” Recently, he told the family about testing positive. “They have been supportive and caring,” he says. “It’s ’We love you for the person you are, and so

what if you're gay, and why is HIV different than any other life-threatening illness?'"

Gee, I don't know -- ask Jerry Falwell. Falwell was Reagan America's star preacher, providing a platform to all those malcontents who didn't want their family values rocked by sexual "deviants" having more fun than themselves. Cries of the moral decay caused by homosexuality and abortion fueled Falwell's fire and brimstone, making him a media maven. The AIDS crisis presented him -- and a whole host of other Christian characters -- with the perfect opportunity to wag yet more disapproving fingers at gays and drug users and their road to societal ruin (see "Hate Thy Neighbor"). The reverend, in his own public-opinion-poisoning way, has insisted that homosexuals recruit children and even equated us with rapists. He selectively quotes the Bible in targeting gay activity as immoral. (Why doesn't he also cite the Leviticus passage that insists you must never "wear material woven of two kinds of material"? Because, like me, he favors tacky polyester blends.) "His agenda to slam gays and incite hatred is very un-Christian," Beasley says. "If you were going to emulate Christ, you'd love everybody, but that's Jerry." Although his Moral Majority folded in 1989, as the preacher was increasingly dismissed as a blowhard, it had still made him rich and famous -- and he's not about to give that up any more than Dr. Laura is.

The Tinky Winky issue was the straw that broke the homophobe's back. Last year, *National Liberty Journal*, a monthly published by Falwell's Liberty University, warned parents that the Teletubby character is gay because "he is purple -- the gay pride color -- and his antenna is shaped like a triangle -- the gay pride symbol." Falwell didn't write the article, but he told the press, "As a Christian, I feel that role-modeling the gay lifestyle is damaging to the moral lives of children." Tinky's sexuality is actually the only thing I've ever agreed with Falwell on. That Tink is gay was obvious to me, too, but while Falwell felt this posed a threat to the mental health of young ones, I thought it sent a wonderful message about the importance of being out, proud and properly accessorized.

Beasley disagrees. "All four of the characters are genderless, as far as I'm concerned," he says. "It's absurd to say this inverted clothes hanger on top of his head is the gay symbol." Whether or not we're together on the details, having Beasley publicly battle Falwell's ignorance was so much fun that queers sat around shrieking, "Again! Again!" Beasley tried to continue the debate last October, when Falwell met with 200 members of Soulforce, the organization run by Mel White, the former Falwell speechwriter-turned-openly gay reverend, seeking justice for all sexualities. Beasley wanted to be part of the supposedly conciliatory high-profile event, but White nixed that notion -- the cousins' relationship is too "volatile." Jimmy Creech, a United Methodist minister who was defrocked for sanctioning a gay marriage and who, with his wife, runs the HIV support group that Beasley attends, was at the meeting. "I think it was the beginning of something that could be positive," Creech says. "Certainly, Jerry Falwell hasn't changed his attack on gay people, but it began a relationship that may be fruitful. But I'm not sure."

Beasley spoke directly to Falwell last fall, calling him in hopes of setting up tea for two, not 200. They had a perfectly agreeable chat about family members and matters, but Beasley's attempts to arrange the powwow failed when Jerry canceled twice. (Dr. Falwell did not respond to *POZ*'s requests for comment. At press time Falwell's publicist sent a letter to Mel White saying "[Falwell]

offered to meet with Brett any Sunday that Brett would come to Thomas Road Church, after which Jerry would take him to lunch. As of yet, Brett has not taken him up." Brett says, "That's a lie." Ask Falwell yourself: 804.239.9281.) Reveals Beasley, "I want to look him in the eye and say I'm HIV positive and ask him: 'Can we stand together before the press and can you say, "I have compassion for people with HIV. This is not just a faceless disease. It has meaning because my cousin has it"?'"

If I personally ever had the chance to meet Falwell -- and God has somehow kept us apart -- I'd wring his neck and make a scene screaming about all the hideous hate he's inflamed with his bigoted preaching. The more mild-mannered Beasley hopes for a reasonable dialogue -- he wants to make changes in his own quiet way: "It would be a great opportunity to increase public awareness, because a lot of people -- especially young ones -- no longer view AIDS as a threat and aren't practicing safe sex. They see it as something almost glamorous because all these healthy HIV positive people are walking around with buff bodies and it's like, 'You don't die from that anymore,' and that's not true."

Falwell will never be a gay hero, but this is his chance to counteract the decades of damage he's done. Beasley's HIV status should resound with immediacy for Falwell, proving that not only are there gays with AIDS in the Bible Belt, but there's one in his own family -- and he's not hiding in a closet. "I want Jerry to join me in putting out the message that every family -- even Christians! -- can love and respect their gay children," he says. "If he can't say gay is good, at least he can say hate is bad. That will give hope to all the gay kids too ashamed of what God and their parents will say if they come out."

Could Falwell be just a little bit gay himself? Beasley pauses significantly, then says: "That's not a question I've ever pondered. Jerry says he's a born-again Christian, which means he had an epiphany and saw the light, but he was a hellraiser all through his adolescence. There are a lot of skeletons in the Falwell closet." In between trying to reach out to his woebegone cousin, Beasley is also hoping to spread his feelers around for a husband. In the '80s, Beasley had a six-year relationship with a gay army gynecologist ("Go figure"), and in the '90s he dated a drug-company employee for four years. But Beasley was single when he got the HIV news. "I don't feel I'm incomplete," he says, "but I am a relationship-oriented person and I'd like to share my life with someone. Unfortunately, in Raleigh, you're limited in how you meet gay people. There are two gay bars, right across the street from each other. Jesse Helms is right there in the thick of it all." No doubt canoodling with Jerry Falwell.

As consolation, folks have given Beasley other backup. His e-business employers know he's gay, posed nude and has HIV, and stand behind him. Also, Jimmy Creech's support group provides an outlet ("Beasley is people-oriented, very gregarious, and very kind and generous," Creech says). Dad Linton says he also backs Beasley 150 percent ("We think he's a great guy -- very talented and good-looking," says his proud pop. "We raised our children to be responsible and get out there and do it. He's had bouts of depression, but I think lately he's had more good days than bad"). And Beasley's pastor has shown only compassion, since, as Beasley explains it, "Lutheranism is basically back-door Catholicism. It's very open to ministering to gays and lesbians."

Although religious ("every *other* Sunday“), Beasley has no regrets or repents. ”That’s not living in the present,“ he says. ”I don’t beat myself over what happened.“ Instead, he’s trying to transcend future hardship in ways that would probably inspire even Jerry Falwell. While struggling, he hasn’t lost his edge (”George W. scares me"), his selectivity (he’s turned down every post-*Men* porn offer) or, most important, his sense of humor. For Halloween, he laughs, he may want to dress like Scarlett O’Hara in a gigantic hoopskirt and give Jerry a big, wet kiss. “But I don’t think he’d even want to shake my hand,” he adds, sadly. “He’d probably run to the bathroom afterward.” Beasley muses for a second, then blurts out, “We’re not kissing cousins...yet.”

So, c’mon, Jerry. This is your chance to open minds and save lives. Do more than announce that Tinky Winky has AIDS.

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