Getting Out on the Job

Employee of the month

August 1, 2005 By Lucile Scott

Michael Gonzales
48
Long Beach, California
Communications Specialist
Diagnosed 1986

Deciding about disclosure is part of any HIVer's job description. Michael Gonzales has programmed phones at a Long Beach, California, shipping company for 20 years. He started as a temp, but docked their permanently after his diagnosis because of its top-notch benefits and steady pay. Here's what happened when he risked disclosure in the AIDS-rocked waves of the '80s.

Describe the attitude toward HIV in 1986.
People were scared. They talked about getting HIV from toilets or pencils. I was worried they would fire me if I disclosed, but I trusted the company.

What did you do? I kept calling in sick, so I decided to tell them why. I hoped they would work with me about sick leave—and they did. And I wanted to help educate people.

How did they respond? They wanted to educate the entire company. I was amazed. I think they knew AIDS was not going away. We had my physician talk to the employees, and I saw fears about working with a PWA dissipate.

What advice do you have for people thinking about disclosing at work?
It lets you work with the company about benefits. As for stigma, hold your head high, be proud of who you are and just go with it.

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