Going Home: Gene Schneider

Gene Schneider's own private Iowa

June 1, 1994 By Tim Sacco

Once, nto all that long ago, one of the few big city encroachments into the typically quiet life of Iowa City was the New York City-style egg creams whipped up at the lunch counter in the back of Pearson's drugstore. University of Iowa students homesick for a touch of the big city took comfort in the familiar, frothy confection. Pearson's still makes egg creams, but the pharmacists these days are just as likely to be filling prescriptions for AZT and Interferon.

In America's heartland, many of the people who are being treated for AIDS contracted it while living in big cities. Gene Schneider, who grew up in eastern Iowa "in a town of 700, on a good day" succumbed to wanderlust early and moved to San Francisco before he was 15 to live with relatives.

Life on the West Coast suited him. Eventually he relocated to San Diego, where he lived with a lover for six years before they decided, in 1987, they had to leave California.

"So many people in San Diego were becoming ill. I decided to go back before I got AIDS."

Iowa City is a university town of 60,000 full-time residents, 28,000 students and only 49 reported AIDS cases.

Schneider, 34, thought that by going home to Iowa he could escape the big city scourge, but eventually he learned that he hadn't. He was diagnosed with AIDS in January 1992 -- the same month he lost his job. He had been working for a year as a deli manager at a local supermarket where he also created a catering service.

"I loved my job," Schneider says. "You'd have to love it to work 80 hours a week."

When Schneider dropped an alarming amount of weight and was constantly tired, the store manager told him, "We have to let you go."

"I asked him why," Schneider says. "I asked him three times. He never gave me a reason."

Schneider sued the store but lost his case because of insufficient proof of discrimination. AIDS

activists in Iowa City continue to boycott the store.

These days, Schneider has more pressing concerns than Pearson's egg creams. His daily bill of fare includes servings of ddC, Fluconazole, Bactrim, Nambumetone and various other drugs prescribed to stave off opportunistic infections. Schneider has full-blown AIDS but is currently asymptomatic. He has fought off PCP, thrush and shingles, but constantly battles chronic fatigue and various gastrointestinal ailments.

His large family is supportive, but since none of them lives in Iowa City, Schneider relies on a network of straight and gay friends who phone to chat and visit and to make sure he is taking his meds.

Schneider now works with the Iowa Center for AIDS Resources and Education (ICARE) in Iowa City, and with the American Red Cross in Waterloo, 92 miles to the north. The Red Cross sends Schneider to schools throughout eastern Iowa to lecture students about the dangers of unsafe sex.

Before checking in at the ICARE office, Schneider likes to start his day at Mike's Tap on Wright Street, "the longest street in Iowa City; it's a whole block long," Schneider says sarcastically. "I'm an early bird, and I like to go there to drink my coffee with the owners, a married couple named Bev and Rich."

If he hears customers speaking disparagingly about people with AIDS, "I will straighten them out pretty quickly," Schneider says. "Sometimes I'll get a response like, 'Well, who are you?' I tell them I work for the Red Cross, and then they'll come out with more questions and stuff. After I've educated them enough, I'll tell them that I am also a person with AIDS."

Mostly he draws support from his partner, Al, 35, an HIV negative printing plant superintendent. They have been friends for 12 years and lovers for six.

Often their dates revolve around America's pastime. "We're *big* baseball fans," Schneider says. "We have season tickets to the Cedar Rapids Kernels. When the city changed its affiliation to the California Angels, there was a contest to pick a name for the new club. Everybody knew it would wind up having something to do with corn. Thus, the Kernels."

How are the Kernels doing this year?

"They lost their first game Sunday, and then lost Monday too. Yesterday was rained out." Then, sounding like baseball fans throughout the country, Schneider wistfully adds, "But, you know, the season is still young."

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