HIV Tat Spat

August 1, 1999 By Gabi Horn

Six years ago, John Baldetta, a nursing aide at Seattle's Harborview Hospital, rolled up his sleeves and got fired. His *HIV positive* tattoo would upset patients so much, claimed Harborview honchos, that they made him cover it and forbade him from discussing HIV. Baldetta, now 34, cried discrimination and won several partial, precedent-setting victories, including a '96 free-speech ruling that PWAs have the right to disclose in the workplace. An unfavorable discrimination verdict set him back in April, and though he has replaced the HIV tat with a band of hands and found work at another hospital, he's still fighting for the right to bare arms.

Did patients freak about the tattoo?
No, it was the paper-pushers upstairs who had a problem with it. They said people were so afraid of contracting HIV that it would "negatively affect patient outcome in recovery." When I refused to cover it, I was shown the door.

How did patients respond to it?
Sometimes they asked about risk, or about how my parents handled it. I'd answer, or refer them to ASOs, but I never gave treatment advice. Harborview said talking about AIDS wasn't part of my job description, but it's not like I was screaming "AIDS" and handing out pamphlets.

It's ironic that a hospital fired you for announcing you have a disease.
It just shows how AIDS is a presence in society but not in the workplace. During jury selection, when asked if they'd object to a health care worker with HIV, four out of 16 people left.

Why did you replace the tattoo?
A lot of the reasons I got it—to regain control, commit to safer sex and show that people with HIV can be on the caring side of illness—have been accomplished. Some people are relieved it's gone, as if that'll make me HIV negative again. Sorry, I can't be negative for anyone's comfort level, whether it's on my arm or not.

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