I Give At The Office

A career in HIV contributes to mental health

August 1, 2006 By Derek Thaczuk

Counselor John Gaylord was looking for an emotional release from his HIV. And he found it: with more HIV. Diagnosed 15 years ago, Gaylord is one of thousands of positive volunteers, clinicians and administrators who make the virus Job One, both at home and at the office. “Many people are afraid of being overwhelmed by HIV, having it take over their identity,” says Gaylord, who works with a positive clientele. “So much is beyond our control. This work can be a way to take back some of that control.” Working works, he says, because “your mental health benefits when you feel you’re not being passive.”

There’s something to be said, too, for a workplace where your HIV status is a given and you can trade self-care tips. You can even call in sick when, as Ryan Bureyko, of the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation, puts it, “my AIDS hurts.” Adds Bureyko, “I deal with life and death every day. I go home knowing what it means to be alive.”

Newly diagnosed people sometimes find that working with others with HIV helps put their situation in perspective. Alex Hammond tested positive in 2002. Being a peer counselor at Atlanta’s AIDS Survival Project, he says, allows him to see that there are many more resources now and that prospects are much better than they were for those diagnosed years ago.

An HIV career, full or part-time, can help people confront tough personal and community issues. As director of the Black AIDS Institute, Phill Wilson faces climbing black infection rates and slim resources. But he says it’s a boon to be “part of the cause.” “Being actively engaged in my own survival and that of others helps my quality of life,” says Wilson, who’s been positive for more than 20 years. The job’s extensive networking gives him “all kinds of people I can call if I have my own concerns.”

There’s always the danger, of course, that the stress of caregiving will tax one’s own health. Many positive “AIDS care survivors” avoid burnout by making careful choices. Robert Frascino MD, of the Robert James Frascino AIDS Foundation, says, “Back in ’96, when my own T cells were dropping, I left clinical practice for teaching,” looking for a way to make a bigger difference with less exhaustion. Other people gain stamina from their interactions. One enthusiastic peer advocate, who asked not to be identified, says, “My clients say they need me to stay well so I can stick around to help them, so they’ll ask if they can give me a hand with anything.” A hand is what she

deserves.

Find a job in HIV at POZ.com's job postings under "Connections." Or call an AIDS organization (see POZ.com's AIDS Services).

BOILING POINT

AIDS work isn't everyone's cup of chai—chronic understaffing, a breakneck pace and being surrounded by illness can cause stress and burnout. Here's how to simmer down:

Flex it: Many agencies let staff vary their hours and take time off whenever they need to, as long as the clients get served.

Talk it: One Phoenix AIDS service organization has a formal workplace counseling program. "They've been great at helping me set priorities," says an employee, "and deal with stress."

Wing it: "I know when it's time to be serious and when it's OK to be a goof," says Toronto's Ryan Bureyko. "This isn't the corporate world; there's a totally wacky sense of humor, and I can be myself."

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