It’s Alright, Ma

When your kid’s been an addict and come out alive, HIV can be the toughest letters you’ve ever heard. Lillian Thieman finds forgiveness is a two-way street.

July 1, 2000 By Lillian Thiemann

Parents pray never to hear certain phrases from their kids: I need money. I totaled the car. I’m dope sick. I need an alibi. And the ever-popular I’m HIV positive. But this is just what many parents get to hear when their little darlings start down the road to drug addiction. Eventually, after years of trying to get us to stop behaviors they don’t understand, they become weirdly conditioned to our world. Some have a meltdown and kick the offending child out of their lives and out of their hearts. Others, like my mom, give you all their money, bail you out of jail, lie to the police and sacrifice themselves on the altar of your addiction. If they’re lucky, you come to your senses, get clean and start to live a useful life.

With a lot of work, you can sometimes make amends to your family for all the damage you did in your criminal drug past. But handling the stigma of having an HIV positive child is, for some parents, a tougher deal. This was the case for mine when, after some years drug-free, I tested positive. I was angry with myself, but just as worried for my long-suffering mom. After all she had been through with me, and all the years she’d been without me, my mom thought she was finally home free. It was like she’d won the lottery by getting me back in one piece, productive and sane to boot. How would she take the news?

So I kept my secret for two whole weeks, and then I cracked. I couldn’t let another day go by without telling Mom. She’d been privy to some of my most heinous acts, she’d always been there for me no matter what, and she deserved to know. I sat down, looked her in the eye and said, “I’m HIV positive.” She looked right back and said, “I knew it!” My mother, who always said, “If you don’t pay in the beginning, you’ll pay in the end,” seemed to have been intuitively waiting for this moment. She immediately outlined how our lives would proceed: I would live the best life I could; when I got ill, she would take care of me; and when I got “too ill,” we would both kill ourselves. Did I mention that she’s a little controlling?

At first, I didn’t want anyone but my mom to know about my HIV status. People had known I was a dope fiend, but they seemed to accept me now for the new person I had become. The truth was, I had my own judgments about what it meant to be HIV positive—and they weren’t good. Angry and ashamed in a way I never was of being an addict and a criminal, how could I expect anyone else to accept me now? It seemed to be somehow dirty to be positive, like having a scarlet letter branded

on my forehead that no amends would take away. When my mom requested that I never, ever tell my five brothers, I had a twinge of regret but agreed for the sake of her peace of mind. The thought of dealing with their bigoted judgments and questions was too painful for her at 65.

Twelve years later my brothers still don't know. They're all older than me, and I only feel truly close to one of them. Still, I have come to a level of self-knowledge that allows me to be out about being HIV positive in every other area of my life, so it is extremely difficult to keep this secret from my brothers. I have broached the subject with my mom on several occasions. Each time, her absolute panic has beaten me back.

After I became the editor of InfoPack, an AIDS newsletter, I brought the first issues to my mom to read, and she saved every one. She had a copy of every booklet and POZ column I wrote. She even proudly attended a community forum I put together. Then one day last year, when she wasn't feeling well, she said, "Lillian, you know those magazines I have in the box in the closet? Would you please take them out of here?" She explained that if she were to die suddenly, she wouldn't want anyone to find them. She anticipated being ashamed even in death.

It is not easy for any of us dealing with disclosure to find our way comfortably. Many people with a drug-abuse history or past issues around sexual orientation have already suffered the pain of stigma from loved ones. More significantly, we have punished ourselves. Coming to a loving place within ourselves is one of the greatest challenges we face. The feeling of being solid and strong about who I am enabled me to pick up that box of my AIDS writings, smile and say, "Sure, Ma," and then go about living my "positive" life.

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