Life After HIV

PWAs head to the front of the class

October 1, 1998 By Scott Hess

Wanna be teacher's pet? This year, 244 brainy hopefuls jockeyed for 63 full-tuition scholarships as part of the New College of California's HIV/AIDS Reentry and Empowerment Project. Founder Bill Hershon, 45, received a full New College law scholarship in 1992 from the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, then crusaded for other HIVers, and hatched the program—now a $600,000 education fund—in 1995. "I designed it for those who dropped out of college when they tested positive," he said. "The response was staggering."

JEFF GETTY, 40
HIV diagnosed: 1987
Study: BA with a focus in journalism
Class of: Fall 1998
Why back to school?: "I still hold out hope that I'll get this disease under control, and ultimately I may need a career again."
How is the program important to you?: "It provides an academic foundation for AIDS activism. And it got me thinking about things other than AIDS."
Long-term goal: "If I survive, knowing how to write well is going to help me."
Voted most likely: "To survive."

MICHELLE NUGENT, 35
HIV diagnosed: 1989#
Study: Law
Class of: Spring 2001
Why back to school?: "I was making my funeral arrangements when protease came on the scene. My perspective changed from funeral expenses to 401k [retirement fund]."
How is the program important to you?: "I had to stop taking my meds because I developed resistance to them. School is my focus now. It is everything."
Long-term goal: "To be a district attorney—that's where the power is."
Voted most likely: "To have more kids."

JAKE TAPIA, 26
HIV diagnosed: 1997
Study: Humanities

Class of: Summer 1999
How is the program important to you?: “It’s been a light at the end of a tunnel filled with pain and anxiety. It’s given me the extra push to make my life better, by preparing me to re-enter the workforce with a competitive edge and giving me a personal feeling of accomplishment.”
Long-term goal: “A job in the AIDS community. And I’d like to go to grad school for a master’s in fine arts or photography. It’d be nice to combine the two goals into one.”
Voted most likely: “To be seen in drag in downtown San Francisco throwing a knit cap into the air and singing, ‘I’m gonna make it after all!’”

SEAN SASSER, 29
HIV diagnosed: 1988
Study: Humanities
Class of: Fall 1999
Why back to school?: “I didn’t think I’d live to see 30. I had no direction. I dropped out of college at 19, so I came back for a sense of closure.”
How is the program important to you?: “It provides for the cost of completing my BA. There are tons of PWAs like me who interrupted school.”
Long-term goal: “To go on to my master’s at the New College. Being back in school has opened so many doors for me.”
Voted most likely: “To be abducted by aliens.”

TOM CALVANESE, 38
HIV diagnosed: 1985
Study: Humanities
Class of: Fall 1998
Why back to school?: “I left university in 1987 to take care of my best friend, who was diagnosed with AIDS. After 12 years of AIDS work, it started to consume me. A friend told me about the program and it was a great opportunity to recreate my life.”
How is the program important to you?: “It’s giving me an opportunity to come back to life. I’ve been very lucky with my health but this is a new lease on life.”
Long-term goal: “To complete my degree, re-establish some financial security, and see that my lover is well taken care of. And to improve my snowboarding.”
Voted most likely: “To be class clown.”

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