Mailbox

April 1, 2000

All Worked Up

Although inspiring at face value, I found the “Work 2000” package in the January issue lacking an appropriate level of journalistic objectivity. Many PWAs don’t live in progressive metropolitan areas like New York City. Given that *POZ* is a multicultural magazine, your portrayal of employment bliss for HIVers was disappointing. Comprehensive reporting would have included an exposé of the working conditions for people with HIV in the ultraconservative Midwest and south-central states. People living in these areas face a multitude of problems simply holding a job.

The emphasis on domestic-partner benefits in “Take This Job & Love It” discounted the experience of unpartnered readers. Focusing instead on companies that provide flextime, comp time, job sharing and HIV acceptance would have been a more practical approach. I’d have preferred you to tell it like it is: Moving from dependence to employment is a huge gamble with potentially dire consequences. Finding a friendly or hostile environment is completely up to chance, since most questions that must be asked up-front can’t be asked without disclosing one’s serostatus.

I enjoy *POZ*, but these articles were a transparent exercise in self-promotion. Over the next few months, I’ll have to count how many times your top 25 PWA-friendly companies spend their advertising dollars in POZ. That will show me how sincere you are at showing the realities of working with AIDS.

Gary D. Kluczynski
Via the Internet

POZ replies: *Of the 25 corporations listed, Glaxo Wellcome alone advertises in our pages. As Grant Lukenbill indicated in the article, he compiled the list based on widely recognized, but narrow, criteria that have nothing to do with our magazine.*

Speedo Freak

I’m sending this letter in the hope of obtaining recognition for the Speedo corporation, which has gone beyond the call of duty to help one of its former employees suffering in the end stages of AIDS. Speedo has made tremendous efforts to accommodate my friend—unlimited sick days, long lunches, financial counseling and assistance, and reduced job responsibilities. It’s been two years since he has been able to work, and Speedo staff still go out of their way to help. He has lost the ability to speak, and when he could no longer hold a pen to write down his needs, the staff gathered donations to purchase him a laptop computer. Learning of this big-hearted gesture, Speedo management bought the laptop for him.

Glenn Green

El Segundo, California

Revealing Responses

I agree with Sean Strub that stating that you are HIV positive is a fair and moral way of approaching a sexual relationship in whatever form ("Do Ask, Do Tell," January 2000). But a very big point has been missed. It seems that everyone is willing to blame another person, but they're not willing to take on the responsibility when they contract HIV. This is too simple! Protect yourself—that way, whether or not your partner has HIV, you have taken control and determined the outcome. There is too much information out there to plead ignorance.

I've had HIV for 19 years. I have sexual relations with both HIV positive and negative people, and I make sure that they know my status and that I take the necessary precautions to ensure that I don't infect them. There are some who reject me—so be it. I don't want to know them anyhow. There are others who want me to have unprotected sex with them after I've disclosed my status, and to them I say, "Get the hell out." They obviously have a personality disorder or self-esteem issue which I don't want to be a part of. Bottom line—be responsible for yourself.

Rod Lightheart
Vancouver, Canada

Right on, Sean Strub! I am gay, HIV negative and seeking intimacy. Because of what I've learned from reading *POZ*, I wouldn't hesitate a minute—besides to put on a condom—to have an intimate relationship with someone who has HIV. I plan to enlist the help of the FATE program (Fighting AIDS Through Education) in promoting the "Do Ask, Do Tell" slogan here at the Mark Stiles Unit.

Benny R. McGehee
Department of Corrections
Beaumont, Texas

I found Sean Strub's "Do Ask, Do Tell" very interesting. Last November I decided to take my story public. Many were dumbfounded that I could be so open. One doctor asked me how I got infected. I could tell from the way he asked that he was expecting me to tell him that I got HIV in an "innocent" way. When I replied, "From my understanding, there are five ways to get it, and I am guilty of all five," his mouth fell open and he said, "You mean to say you had a blood transfusion before 1983?" He did not ask any more questions.

I am glad that I am out about my AIDS status. In a way, I feel free. My sexuality should be of no concern to anybody who does not wish to go to bed with me.

Terry Taxil
Via the Internet

Sean Strub's "Do Ask, Do Tell" policy would be unnecessary if gay sexual connections were consistently "heart based" rather than looks-and-fantasy mediated. I am in complete agreement with coming out about one's status if one is hoping to forge a relationship with another man. It would be idiotic to aim for emotional bonding and leave out a personal truth such as one's

serostatus.
But in the context of a meeting wherein sexual play is the prime directive of the connection, it is my experience that coming out about my serostatus prompts the great majority of my partners to back off, leaving me lonely, sad and angry. This has been the pattern for the past 16 years as I've been dealing with the dynamics of occasional sexual connection while being asymptomatic HIV positive.

I'm aware there are plentiful exceptions to what is for me an experiential rule. If one is young and/or cute and/or buff and/or hung and/or affluent and/or remarkably entertaining, sex partners will likely forgive one for being seropositive and go for the perceived gold as a return on the investment of cruise, flirt or personal ad. That's just primate behavior—taking risks for the possibility of something or someone strongly desirable.

My approach continues to be to play safe with everyone, for my own sake as well as theirs, and to assume everyone is positive. I abhor the idea of reinfection, just as I would infection if I were negative. Medical information should be kept private, and all sane parties to a sexual scene need to keep themselves individually responsible for maintaining safer sex's wisdom for a lifetime.

Louis Bidwell
San Francisco

For quite some time, I have been "telling" in my personal life, whether people want to hear it or not. It is because of my alcohol addiction that after I found out I had HIV, I started protecting others. This was back in 1989, when it certainly wasn't a vogue thing to do. Why did I disclose? I think Shakespeare put it this way: "This above all, to thine own self be true/And it must follow as the night the day/ Thou canst not then be false to any man." Though I am an alcoholic and drug addict, I do care about people and would never want to kill anyone.

I am on a prison unit with hundreds of inmates with AIDS. Yet you almost never hear AIDS talked about here, and when you do, what you hear is mostly ignorant trash designed to put the blame on gays. The other inmates don't know how to take me because I do tell and I am just like them in many ways: I love women and gambling, but I am out with my serostatus and down on hateful B.S. On the sly, many have said that they think I am brave and that my example educates others. If I can do it here in the belly of the beast, why can't others do it out there? I won't say it's easy, but from the start of my "Do tell" policy, I haven't had the stress or burden of being found out or of possibly hurting someone. It has absolutely been worth it.

POZ has really hit on something that I pray will catch on elsewhere in the HIV community. To those who would lay shame on us for living by the policy of "Do Ask, Do Tell" by saying we want to glorify AIDS, all I have to say is that your shame equals death. Keep it to yourself.

Hugh Calloway
Rosharon, Texas

Hail To The Chief

I want to thank Walter Armstrong for articulating his struggle with the self-fulfilling prophecy of contracting HIV (Editor's Letter, January 2000). His poignant realization that self-hatred is inextricably tied to unsafe sex practices should serve as a wake-up call to POZ readers of similar mind to seek therapy. Unfortunately for many who are now part of the second wave, they came to acknowledge their self-hatred only after their infection. As their spirits are beginning to heal, they have to deal with the physical effects that HIV has on their bodies. The message conveyed in Armstrong's letter is one of the most important in stemming the spread of HIV in this century.

Joe Landry
Publisher
The Advocate
Los Angeles

Walter Armstrong's Editor's Letter provides a powerful mission statement for *POZ*: "keeping the HIV positive healthy and the HIV negative uninfected." *POZ's* vision should be of a future where the majority of its readers are HIV negative and working to stay that way. I read the magazine not just for the health tips, but to help me cope with safe sex. I hope you do more coverage of HIV negative issues in the future.

Thomas Kraemer
Corvallis, Oregon

As a woman involved in the AIDS battle for six years, I have long been haunted by a feeling that many intelligent gay men try to get HIV. Walter Armstrong's Editor's Letter revealed yet another layer of painful realities. I want to thank him for his incredible honesty. It's amazing that he is willing to be so intimate with readers. It's a shot in the arm for me. I needed that.

Deborah Campbell
Via the Internet

As an HIV negative man of 30 who has been an activist and who has "real" (not latex) sex, I'm ashamed to be a part of a community that tries to make one kind of sex bad and the other good. So forgive me if I don't see Walter Armstrong's opinion that "unsafe sex is bad" and that HIV negative gay men want to get HIV because of "self-hatred" or "survivor guilt" as progressive thinking.

Armstrong committed "to browbeat a bit" in the pages of *POZ.* It makes no difference that when he browbeats people who have real sex (barebackers), he shifts his posture from attacking to "healing" (read: curing). Jerry Falwell and his Jesus freaks have the same pejorative and judgmental posture toward gay people in general: "You're sick and we want to help you."

I subscribed to *POZ* because of articles on barebacking that approached some level of honesty and balance. Now it seems they were only acts of token sensationalism. After reading four issues of your magazine, I've concluded that *POZ* is just as preachy as the rest of the gay press. Cancel my subscription.

Brian Jeffries

Ex-Communication

Tolerance of intolerance is hypocritical and pathetic. I am referring to the January 2000 Catching Up With on "ex-gay" preacher—fanatic is a more apt description—Michael Johnston. Your coverage at no point gives the lie to nor disapproves of "ex-gays." There is no such thing as "ex-gay." This is a deeply homophobic, fiction-based movement of religious zealots that is the enemy of all gay people. Gay men who participate in it are deeply self-hating. And for POZ—whose founder, Sean Strub, is still, I presume, a gay man—to include such antigay "missionaries," especially without irony or probing, is unacceptable.

I'm cancelling my subscription. If any type of person comes close to deserving AIDS, it is such self-loathing, gay-sex-loathing "ex-gays" as what's-his-name.

Harry E. Baldwin
Santa Monica, California

POZ replies: We set out to create a space in which all people with HIV can gather regardless of party line and with no house rule about getting along. Sorry to lose you.

Hiss And Yell

As an AIDS activist for the past decade, I'm outraged to find ACT UP listed among the Biggest Busts in your December 1999 issue ("The AIDS Decade: The 99 Greatest Moments of the '90s"). Unless disrupting a George W. Bush fundraiser, seizing the U.S. Trade Representative's office, picketing the Department of Commerce, chaining ourselves to the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree and handing out free condoms at St. Patrick's Cathedral were all figments of my imagination, ACT UP is hardly a bust!

The epidemic has changed over the years, and so has activism, but that doesn't mean it's over. With increasing numbers of people with HIV belonging to poor and disenfranchised communities in the United States and around the world, activism is as necessary as ever. If we don't fight back against the erosion of our civil rights, struggle to hold on to hard-won benefits such as housing for homeless PWAs and demand that medications be available to everyone, who will? *POZ* should be supporting and encouraging activism, not joining the mainstream media in ignoring it and declaring it over.

Kate Barnhart
ACT UP/YELL
New York City

Cocktail Chatter

Thanks to Martin Delaney's article on structured treatment interruptions ("Happy Holidays?" December 1999) and Mike Barr's interview with Steven Miles, MD ("How to Get There From Here," October 1999), I feel strengthened in my longtime conviction that I have to get off these disgusting meds.

Since I joined the cocktail party out of necessity two years ago, my life has been in a complete "hangover" state. After starting them and complaining of stomach problems, I was given two more drugs. "No appetite? Take these." "Can't sleep? Here's some more pills." And guess what I got when I cried depression? I now take several pills a day, and from what I can tell, none of those for my side effects are working. I can barely get off the couch and cook my meals some days.

What used to be our federal government is now for corporations, by corporations, and will not patent any drugs made with natural ingredients. This is why pharmaceutical companies are not interested in developing peptides and other possibilities, and why medical marijuana will never be legalized. Will someone please get me an icepick and a barf bag?

John Braden
Provincetown, Massachusetts

Father Knows Best

As the father of Stephen Gendin—the focus of much *POZ* hate mail over the years—I would like to say a few things. My aim is to try to shed a little light to accompany the heat following "Both Sides Now" (November 1999).

I love Stephen, but am decidedly not a fan of his sexual philosophy. I do not care to defend any views he put forth in his most controversial article or in the others in which he has developed a radical theory of sexuality. But this much I know: Stephen is not an amoral "What do I care about others?" person. He has wrestled hard with sexual issues for more than 15 years.

I will not take your time to outline Stephen's virtues other than to say he has been dedicated to helping PWAs since his early college days. However, with the exception of a few saints, all people are complex mixtures of good and bad. So I am shocked by the vehemence with which so many *POZ* readers have denounced Stephen, wanting him dead or imprisoned for murder, and have delighted in fantasies of having his penis cut off. I am amazed that any person would expect Stephen to be immune to the temptations that resulted in his partner becoming infected. His business is as a health provider, not a preacher. He understands the dangers of unsafe sex better than nearly everyone and has done a fair amount of work helping others understand those dangers, but he does not take it as his role to tell others how to live. The point of his article wasn't to bother readers with a true confession, but to present one person's honest feelings. The overt hatred that some *POZ* readers expressed toward Stephen needs to be ironically juxtaposed with the hatred that certain persons showed toward Matthew Shepard.

I've known Hush McDowell for several years. He is an exceptionally intelligent man who has laid out his own inner turmoil very well. I just returned from a brief visit with Stephen and Hush, and I can assure those who pity Hush that he continues to live a fulfilling life. How odd that the person who has been most deeply affected still loves Stephen, while so many who have never met him cannot find a way to be more forgiving, more tolerant of human frailty and, at the very least, less thirsty for retribution than the homophobes of the world.

Sidney Gendin

Ypsilanti, Michigan

A Fine Appraisal

I want to let you know how much I love POZ. I have been a PWA for 13 years, and it's so refreshing to read your editorials, articles and columns— all true gems by themselves, but an incredible piece of jewelry when put together.

N. Keith Rogers
Via the Internet

Strength Of Sampson

I've been incarcerated since 1992 and reading *POZ* since 1994. Once paroled, I plan to become an advocate for prisoners with HIV because I've experienced firsthand the fear, ignorance and discrimination. I've compiled many grievances about officers telling inmates I have HIV when I wasn't strong enough to tell them myself. But now I am, and I give most of the credit to *POZ*.

Paul Flemm
Sampson Correctional Center
Clinton, North Carolina

Correction

In "The Full Monte" (January 2000), Visible Genetics was incorrectly listed as the manufacturer of an available genotypic resistance test (TruGene). However, that test has not yet been approved for marketing. POZ regrets the error.

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