Married With Children

Come listen to a story 'bout a couple named Combs

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Welcome to Halls, Tennessee, population 1,200, where folks believe you can get AIDS from a mosquito bite. Or from Jesse and Jane Combs, valued members of the Little Church of Christ until they went public as HIV positive. "'I don't want your son around mine!' was one good Christian's response," says Jane, 35. And their seven month old Jesse II doesn't even have HIV.

"People in Halls think that the government is withholding top-secret AIDS information about how you get the disease from toilet seats," says Jesse, 43, with a snort.

Even when Jesse's 10-year-old daughter, Morgan, and Jane's 15-year-old, Daisy, tested negative, the good citizens of Halls steered clear of the Combses. After educating themselves about HIV, Jesse and Jane tried to increase AIDS awareness through talks at the local high school. "I'd get dressed up one side and down the other for bringing this disease into town," says Jesse, whose own mother berated him: "She said I should be in hell for what I did to Jane."

Before he met Jane, Jesse was in a sort of hell. Two broken marriages had left him depressed and prone to fits of rage. Even after he married Jane in 1990, Jesse's depression continued. He ended up in a psychiatric hospital in 1994. He had left his job as an auto mechanic to admit himself, aware that the lithium he was taking no longer worked. Jesse recalls "walking around in a lost daze" in the weeks before his hospitalization, but he received an unintentional form of shock therapy upon check-in: He woke up to find himself face-to-face with a fluorescent sign that screamed beware of blood products.

"That day I not only found out that I had HIV, but full-blown AIDS," Jesse says. His mental state turned out to be AIDS-related: "Lithium raises the white cell count, and they were at war with the HIV-infected cells in my head."

Though going off lithium restored his sanity, Jesse didn't know what to make of his AIDS diagnosis. "I was shocked," he says. "I had always believed the myth that straight white men in the country don't get AIDS." That's why Jesse didn't practice safer sex. "After my second divorce, I acted the way I thought single men should act," he says. Jane does not judge Jesse's behavior. "Who's to say who gave HIV to whom?" Jane says. "Jesse was not the only one in this relationship to be intimate between marriages."

Intimacy is clearly not a problem for the two. “I went through months of guilt,” Jesse says of Jane’s diagnosis, “but Jane forgave me before I ever asked her to, and she keeps on forgiving.” Says Jane: “I love Jesse, and we had been through so much, I thought I might as well stick through this.”

Meanwhile, they’d had it with Halls. They could handle being outcasts -- eventually they were asked to leave their church -- but not at the expense of their children. So when Daisy’s lifelong friends started avoiding her, and Jane couldn’t place Jesse II in day care, the family moved an hour down the highway to Jackson, Tennessee. “You can mess with the mother but not the mother’s kids,” Jane says.

Things are better in Jackson, and with their shared regimen of Crixivan/AZT/3TC, Jesse and Jane are healthy. Daisy’s having sleep-overs again and Jesse II is in day care. Big Jesse hangs out on the front lawn with his neighbor -- a police officer -- until called in for dinner. Even the church has welcomed them, AIDS and all.

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