More Life: Even Tough Guys Get HIV

A boy from the Bronx walks out of the neighborhood

May 1, 1998 By Mike DeStefano

When I tested HIV positive 10 years ago, I figured: Bada-boom, bada-bing, game over. As an Italian American from the Bronx, my coping skills for dealing with my own mortality were limited at best. A crisis where I came from typically involved a nonunion worker changing a lightbulb at a construction site. Pre-AIDS, my world was limited to a street corner in the Bronx. Me and my pals covered our shame with Italian suits and fancy shoes, and shoved our fear in the trunk of a Lincoln Town Car (if there was room with the dead bodies). My heroes were bull-faced and unafraid; a gentle guy who talked of love and making an honest living was a fool. I had lots of connections -- I never waited in line or filled out a single job application, because we had a “guy” who got things done. I was at the top of the local social food chain. Nothing could touch me. But when I was diagnosed with the gay plague, my friends, the big shots, went AWOL. I often wonder how supportive Frankie Fingers would have been about my HIV status. “Hey, Frankie, I got the AIDS virus.” He’d probably offer to find the guy who put the AIDS in my coffee, break his legs, then buy me a cannoli. So there I was, thrown into the world of “those people.” Although I was obviously unprepared to be in the company of men who kiss other men on the lips, whenever I needed support or information about my disease, it was “those people” who were there for me.

I’ll admit I wasn’t Mr. Acceptance right off the bat. I hadn’t even seen a real live homosexual until 1988 at the AIDS Walk sponsored by Gay Men’s Health Crisis. Just the name made me queasy. I showed up, nonetheless, because at the time I was in drug treatment and wanted to support a few friends from my group who had HIV. Since I typically wouldn’t have been caught dead there, I worried: What if someone sees me and tells the boys back home? I could just imagine Carmine the Bull finding out that I went on a march with a bunch of terminally ill queers.

It was a hot July day in Manhattan. The tar on the road was melting; the sweat stains under my armpits were spreading. At the opening ceremony, I checked out the rapidly growing crowd, and felt sick. I was surrounded by hundreds of gay men.

Standing near me at the start of the eight-mile route that stretched around Central Park were two guys in their 20s. One had dark brown hair and a strong build. The other had a blond buzz cut and was thin and frail, but in his eyes, there was something strong. They were in love and not ashamed to show it, as I thought they should be. They caressed one another and kissed. It made me want to puke.

We walked on in the heat, the young lovers keeping right up alongside of me. Every time I turned to look, there they were -- kissing and laughing and getting on my last nerve. When they smiled and said hi, I sneered self-consciously and muttered under my breath, “You talkin’ to me?”

But after about three miles, I noticed that my pace was being dictated by theirs. This may sound crazy, but a voice inside told me to watch them -- they have something to teach me. So I did.

They slowed down as we reached mile five -- and so did I. The blond was having trouble breathing. His friend would patiently tend to him and remind him that he was right by his side. The little guy with the big will was determined to finish this thing. His friend knew it and didn’t suggest stopping, even though the little guy’s breathing was labored. I continued to be drawn to these guys like they were the only two people on the street.

Three quarters of the pack had passed us by mile seven -- one more mile to go. The little guy looked really tired and beaten and ready to give up. It occurred to me that this was probably his last year to do the walk. I watched as his lover lifted him up and said something I’ll never forget: “My body is strong and yours is weak. Your heart is huge and mine has been so small. With your will and my body, we’ll make it to the end.” He kissed him on the forehead and they walked on. I walked away, my heart broken.

You see, I wasn’t used to such tender displays of affection. To me, the beautiful things in life are more painful than the horrible shit. A shotgun to the head I could deal with. But love? Fuhgedaboudit.

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