No Ordinary Patsy

To grandmother's house we go

June 1, 1998 By River Huston

When her son Kenny left for college, Patsy Stewart did a little redecorating of her Largo, Florida home. Forget the generic guest room that many empty nesters opt for, Stewart turned her son's room into a shrine to race-car driving, with shelf upon shelf of Matchbox cars and special-edition racing-related packages of Frosted Flakes, bottles of Coca-Cola, even boxes of Tide. The walls are plastered with signed photographs of the royal family of race-car driving: Chad, Richard and—Stewart's favorite—Kyle Petty. "He is at least a ten," she says, admiring the shrine's life-size Kyle cutout.

NASCAR racer Tim Richmond, who died of AIDS in 1989, is also honored with a life-size photo. But the stash of articles Stewart has collected about the many women he supposedly infected with HIV has left him tarnished in Stewart's eyes. "He's a whoredog, and if he knew he was infected when he was with all these women, he should be shot," says Stewart, who tested HIV positive in 1993.

After attending her first race over 30 years ago, Stewart was hooked. Though her own racing experience has included demolition derby—"It's very similar to a bunch of women going for the same parking space at the mall," she says—most of Stewart's auto career has been behind the scenes. Her dream was to become a car mechanic, but she settled for the next best thing: Stewart spent most of her life selling auto parts. "I got to hang out with the fellas and play with all the parts," she says, "with no grease or backache." On the side, she worked as a statistician at the races. "That's someone who keeps records of the tire temperature, stagger and time in a race."

After her diagnosis, Stewart quit her job managing the auto-parts store. "It was the hardest decision I ever had to make," says Stewart, 45. "That job had become the center of my life, but after a bout of PCP, working sixty hours a week barely left me with enough energy to brush my teeth and fall into bed each night."

Stewart still works the races as a statistician, and if her home is any indication, she's got a variety of interests to keep her busy: Baseball, children, grandchildren. Not to mention her AIDS activism, which includes speaking at local high schools and helping get an important Food and Drug Administration reform passed, the Prescription Drug Users Fee Act. "Being part of changing legislation is something I would never have experienced if not for HIV," says Stewart, who has few good words to say about living with the virus. "I testified in front of a congressional committee. I

felt like I was part of history.”

Other mementos? A counter full of pills that she calls her “daily slap in the face,” including Viracept, d4T, 3TC, dapsone, Diflucan, acyclovir and vitamins, all of which add up to 173 CD4 cells and a viral load of 15,000.

Still, you can sometimes find her doing the tush-push at Curly’s down the street. “When I’m looking fine and guys are hitting on me, they think I’m just blowing them off when I say, ‘Look, buddy, I want you to know I have AIDS before you even buy me a drink,’” says Stewart. “I don’t want anyone wasting my time.”

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