One for the Books

Tommy and Valerie Reeder's romance is better than fiction

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Tommy Reeder remembers being ashamed of his feet. "When I went into detox in 1995," Reeder says, "they made us take off our clothes. My feet were so funky. I was ashamed that I had let myself fall down that far." But after three decades on heroin, seven years on the street and eleven months with an HIV diagnosis, taking off his shoes was just Reeder's first step. "I decided I was not going to die," he says. "That's why I got off drugs. I knew I didn't have to live that way. I had to give myself a chance." Now, at 43, Reeder often finds himself right back in some of the very same prisons where he was once incarcerated, but this time as an HIV educator.

"Once, before I got clean, I was on a prison bus with my hands and feet in shackles," he recalls soberly. "I looked out at the apartment buildings going by and thought, 'That's where I want to be.'" And with Reeder's change of world, he made it through -- "from abandoned houses with no electricity and rain leaking onto my head to a luxury apartment with central heat and air." Reeder bows his head. "For this," he says. "I give all praise to God."

Especially for his new wife, Valerie. The inseparable pair met -- where else? -- at an AIDS service organization in Washington, DC.

Valerie Reeder, who also has HIV, is the founder of Heaven in View Inc., a nonprofit providing education and outreach to local people of color. With few funds but a whole lot of faith, the couple have kept the aptly named organization afloat. "Heaven in View is there to show people who just tested positive that they're not in it alone," Tommy says. "When I get letters from kids in juvenile detention centers after a talk, I thank God that He had more plans for me than to let me die."

The pair's determination is also bearing fruit in the form of the granddaughter they're raising, Annisha, age 7. "We tell her we'll be around when she has grandkids," Tommy says, laughing. "We've got a pair of rocking chairs -- we plan to be using them a long time from now."

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