Over The Wall

To disclose, a fearful HIVer flies to the Far East

February 1, 2005

WHO: Brent Mower
WHAT: Climbs The Great Wall
WHERE: Beijing and Hebei, China
WHEN: 10.25.04–10.31.04

After his 1998 diagnosis, Intel marketing manager Brent Mower, 48, hid his status. But in 2004, he came out to friends and family—and raised $13,100—for a weeklong trek benefiting the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR) and its Therapeutics Research, Education and AIDS Training in Asia (TREAT Asia) program. He soon found himself, with a group of 27, on the Great Wall of China—trudging across 50 miles of mountainous terrain.

In 1998, I was hospitalized for three days. My HIV test came back negative, but my viral load was over 1 million—I was seroconverting. Afterward, I took care of my physical self but didn't disclose to anyone except my boyfriend, who had also tested positive. I was afraid of the stigma and what people might think. In my mind, I should have known better. Only in the past two years, with the help of my therapist, have I begun to share my status with very few people.

I trekked the Great Wall with amfAR because I do a lot of business in Asia and believe that amfAR's programs can stem the impending AIDS crisis, but I also wanted to use the $10,000 fundraising requirement as an excuse to disclose. I waited until the last two months to start because I was so scared. When I did, the outpouring of support from family and friends was overwhelming—it gave me the strength for the trek.

The Wall is really steep, and climbing it was exhausting. I often thought how lucky I was, since my health has been excellent since I tested positive. I was one of only two HIVers in the group, though no one knew my status until our final night. As the group camped out and told stories about parents and siblings lost to AIDS, I felt I was cheating them by not being equally honest. So for the first time in my life, I told a group of acquaintances my HIV status. The experience was so liberating that I walked away, locked myself in a Port-a-Potty and cried. Finally, I had scaled that wall as well.

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—As told to Lucile Scott

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