# Publisher’s Letter

April 1, 2004 By Brad Peebles

PRISON SEX FANTASIES. An informal poll of a few gay male friends suggests that many of us have them. Once, in fact, I went through a brief period of fascination with a place called the Academy Training Center in Georgia, where you could actually pay to experience short-term confinement in a prison-like facility. You could put yourself at the mercy of moonlighting cops and prison guards—“actors”—who would discipline and control you in whatever way you signed up for. The experience, at least officially, did not include sex, but it intrigued me anyway. I wanted to feel powerless.

Every day, I try to control my job, my relationships, my HIV—and the list goes on. I work hard at it, driven by fear and insecurity about all the things I don’t know and the uncertainties that tomorrow will inevitably bring. Fantasies are one place to find escape. Sex is another, and getting drunk or high. I learned the hard way that giving up control in these ways can also mean risking your life. The irony is that by getting infected, I gave myself another big responsibility to deal with.

But at least I have choices—whether it’s to seek the best medical care possible or to go and get locked up for the weekend. For prisoners, including the thousands who have HIV, powerlessness *is* reality. No freedom to choose or change doctors. No choice of when and where to take your pills. No control over who knows you have HIV. No recourse when you are beaten up by the person in the cell next-door or humiliated by a guard. The difference between a prisoner’s experience of living with HIV and my own, like the difference between prison sex fantasies and the reality of jail, is so huge that it can often seem like we have absolutely nothing in common. It is hard to remember, let alone care about, people who are so different from you.

But are we really so different? We have the virus in common, and the stigma and shame that come with it. Society sees us as outsiders. We’re known for the mistakes we’ve made and the “sickness” of who or what we are. There are few places we can go and be truly accepted. Home to a loving family, if we’re really lucky. A church, maybe. A “community” organization that actually knows the meaning of the word. And there’s *POZ.*

*POZ* has always tried to be a place free of judgment—but full of personality—where HIVers can let it all hang out. But for our positive brothers and sisters on the inside, I often throw my hands up, not knowing how *POZ* can help. Sure, we do what we can. Sometimes it’s a small thing like providing a mailing address along with a web site URL. Or something bigger like publishing this HIV Survivor’s Guide for prisoners. And the many letters we get from prisoners indicate that we do help, but they are often accompanied by requests for assistance that we just don’t have the

resources to provide.

I worry that those of us with HIV in the free world, including me, don't really care. We're busy dealing with our own confinements: the virus, responsibilities, fear, shame. But there is little risk in opening up, whether that means talking about a shocking fantasy or caring about people seemingly different from ourselves. The HIV community has always done best when we've been most united—best at fighting stigma, best at urging the development of treatment options. So in the end, I have to agree with labor leader Eugene V. Debs, who said, more than 80 years ago, "While there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

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