Publisher’s Letter

July 1, 2003 By Brad Peebles

Ten years ago, I was obviously younger, arguably cuter and had no trouble at all getting laid. In 1993, there were plenty of men, usually older, willing to sleep with me. Many more were available for anonymous encounters—and this was before Internet “dating.” Why the look back? Because those were my last virus-free days, and I want to better understand what went wrong as I approach the 10-year anniversary of my infection—a strange day to commemorate, but such is life with HIV.

I had just moved to New York City after graduating from college. I didn’t have a job, and deep down, I worried that I couldn’t make it on my own. Sex was both an escape and a way to feel accepted by the community around me. And I had a lot of it. Maybe I took chances with my life because I didn’t know what my future held. Maybe the many men who welcomed me with sex could have set a better safer-sex example. Surely the man who gave me HIV could have kept it to himself.

I know, I know. Staying negative was *my* responsibility. I wonder what more I needed in order to make that a reality. I had plenty of safer-sex education, including a series of thorough, highly individualized interventions from health care providers. And I had friends who had AIDS and died, such as John Cook and James Assatly. In knowing them, I saw firsthand the ravages of this disease. Why wasn’t all this enough to reach me—and keep me negative?

I failed prevention. Or prevention failed me. Either way, the same is true for you, dear reader. And we are failing to stop the spread of HIV in our communities. But I have to admit that for most of these last 10 years, I haven’t cared.

Too many of us HIVers have concluded that prevention isn’t our problem because we’re already infected. Too many of us have unprotected sex with negative partners because we’re already infected. And all of us are too busy trying to live a happy, healthy, well-adjusted life with the virus. While we’re doing that, we need to stop and think about how important it is to not spread this disease.

Lately, I’ve been wondering what more I have to offer prevention than just using condoms or abstaining from sex with negative partners. Is there something I can say about my own experience to a young person that would matter? There are reasons I don’t. My focus every day is to feel good and normal with this disease, to know I have a future ahead of me, that survival is possible. I work hard at it. And while I’m living to the fullest, moving from shame about getting HIV to pride at how

I’m living with it, how can I turn around and say to someone, “Don’t let this happen to you, because it’s really horrible”?

Still, I can’t help but think that HIVers have something powerful to offer prevention, even if it comes at the price of a hurtful acknowledgment of all that is awful about having HIV. And there is always the risk that positive people doing prevention will backfire. After all, as I struggle to answer that big question—“Why did I get infected?”—it dawns on me that I came out in the age of ACT UP, surrounded by heroes. People with courage and determination. Men that I looked up to, admired and loved. And most of them had HIV. While I never consciously wanted HIV in order to be like them, I did want to be like them. Maybe that had more to do with my failure than any of us would like to admit.

At the end of the day, prevention is about the behavior itself: I got infected because I didn’t use a condom. Knowing the below-the-surface motivations helps me understand where I was coming from as a negative person on the day of my infection. Maybe it would even help others. But what is still beyond my understanding is the guy who infected me. Where was he coming from?

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