Publisher’s Letter

April 1, 2003 By Brad Peebles

Back in ’79, on Saturdays or Sundays, my mom would fill a plastic picnic basket with food. Then we’d load up the Volkswagen and drive two hours to visit my big brother, Rory, in “college.” There were always other kids and families visiting, too, and I remember the visits as mostly fun. I was 9-“too young” to be told Rory wasn’t in school, but in prison.

I dreamed of the day he would come home. At 9, I could have used a big brother. He promised he would teach me to throw a football and fight. I’m sure he meant it, but the few times he was out of prison, he was caught up in a drug addiction that hurt our family more than all his sentences combined. I never got good at sports-or at forgiving him.

Fast forward a lifetime. Last fall, Anthony Lucenti, a counselor at New York’s Mid-State Correctional Facility wrote to POZ asking if I would speak at the prison. I’m way too busy and almost always decline such requests. But this time I surprised myself by saying yes. Maybe because it would be a good opportunity to put the magazine’s money where its mouth is. Or because inmates often need outside support to get the HIV prevention and treatment the rest of us take for granted. Or, deep down, because of Rory.

The morning of our visit I was up at 5 a.m., in a panic trying to organize my thoughts on note cards. What did I-a gay white Ivy League graduate-have to offer these guys? I panicked even more three hours later, inside Mid-State’s huge gymnasium, facing a crowd of about 150 men, mostly African-American, who all looked like they could really throw a football and fight! What could they get out of listening to me? The first speaker, a former inmate turned corrections counselor, mesmerized them with his high-powered, street-talkin’ tale of “life outside” with the virus. Clearly he was one of them. How was I going to pull this off?

The prison choir sang a few uplifting songs, then it was my turn. I cleared my throat and began talking about POZ-its history, its mission, how it tries to address many different people united by a common virus. Then I talked about how if you have HIV, being in care with a doctor is essential-whether or not you take meds. As soon as I directed my words specifically to people with HIV, the men seemed to squirm a bit. I realized then that acknowledging there were actual HIVers among us was, for them, really tough.

That gave me a little window into what positive prisoners are up against. That’s when I started talking more personally about having HIV. I didn’t want to make anyone uncomfortable, but after all, HIV was the one thing I had in common with at least some of the men. (True, I once had a

brother in prison, but that was a lifetime ago.) If I had a chance to connect, HIV would be it. I talked about the stigma wrapped up in the fear and shame and guilt I feel at times. About the importance of being open about HIV because lies aren't a recipe for health. About how getting to where I am today took a long time. About the pleasant surprises I got from people I confided in. About how you have to have faith. I wrapped up by urging the audience to try to make Mid-State a safer, more understanding place for HIVers-whom I urged to consider telling their status to one person they could trust.

I think it worked. We had a lively (to say the least) Q&A period. Could someone get HIV from stepping in an infected person's blood on the floor? (No.) Did I think there was a government conspiracy to give AIDS to blacks? (No, but…) Did I believe in reinfection? (Sort of.) One inmate asked why no one from the prison's medical staff had bothered to attend the event. (Good point.) Finally, one inmate asked me point-blank the question I was most afraid of: How did I get HIV? From unprotected sex, I said. I couldn't go as far as to say "gay sex," but I added that drugs and alcohol played a role.

Later, when inmates lined up to get copies of POZ, it was their turn to open up to me. Some quietly confided their positive status, and how keeping it quiet added to the already huge stress of daily prison life, where privacy is virtually nonexistent. All I could do was listen.

But now I want to say to any of the inmates who showed up for the program that day and are reading this, I admire your-our-courage. As for my brother Rory, now out of jail and married: We're barely in touch, and I still haven't told him I'm gay or have HIV. But in the rare event that he is reading this, Rory, I want you to know: More than usual, you were with me that day, too.

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