Right to Fly

Fired United pilot Chris Prilliman survives unfriendly skies

April 1, 1996 By Stefani Eads

Last October former United Airlines pilot Chris Prilliman scoffed at the $10,000 settlement United offered him to shut his mouth. Nothing was going to stop him from going to court to try and get his life back. Three days before his November hearing, however, United's lawyers persuaded the U.S. District Court to dismiss his case, the first of its kind for the airline industry regarding AIDS. Now, Prilliman is planning his Superior Court appeal.

Although his "fight the system" attitude has found him a spot in the national news, 39-year-old Prilliman would rather not be there. He'd rather be piloting a 737 like the ones he used to fly for United before he was fired for being HIV positive.

"I've wanted to fly ever since I was six years old," Prilliman says. "It's what I spent my whole life training to do. And that's the point of the lawsuit. It isn't about money; it's about educating corporate America, showing them I not only want to work but that I'm also more than capable."

Prilliman filed suit against United in April 1995 with no monetary amount named; the claim hinges on the argument that he was fired because he has AIDS, not because he's unable to work. United claims it was only keeping with FAA regulations mandating the grounding of pilots with HIV.

In 1994 Prilliman was suddenly and permanently grounded the day after passing a routine United physical (he'd also passed one for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) less than two months prior).

"[The doctor] just called me on the phone and told me I was grounded, that it was permanent and that he also wanted to talk to my personal physician," Prilliman says. "He did it on the spot before he ever knew the reasons for the [messed-up liver values on] my bloodwork. He just assumed I had an alcohol problem."

When the United doctor learned of the pilot's HIV status, Prilliman, who tested HIV positive in January, 1990 and has suffered no AIDS-defining infections, was medically retired six months before his tenth anniversary of employment.

"There was no discussion of my T-cell count," Prilliman says. "Or of the fact that I wasn't taking any antivirals."

In fact, according to Prilliman, there wasn't any discussion at all. His paychecks were frozen, his medical insurance was cut and his boss didn't speak to him about the matter for nine months.

"United just didn't want me around," Prilliman says. "There was no offer of accommodation in any way, shape or form. I've had to fight to get my disability and medical insurance; I've had to fight to get anything at all."

Now with a medically retired status, Prilliman gets 55 percent of his former salary and all of his medical and disability benefits. But had he been allowed to work six more months in some ground-crew capacity, Prilliman would have earned his 10-year tenure and everything that goes along with it -- including a higher salary, pension package, stock options and unlimited flight benefits for life. Now he has to buy a plane ticket like everyone else.

"I would love to go back to United as a pilot," Prilliman says. "But I'd be willing to do anything for those last six months, even cleaning toilets. I deserve my 10-year package at least."

Part of his fight, he says, is dedicated to Paul Rafalowski, formerly the youngest pilot at United, who set the precedent for the airline's unfair treatment when he was grounded for being HIV positive two months before Prilliman.

"I knew there would be trouble when [the United doctor] found out we shared the same personal physician," Prilliman says.

Actually, they've shared more than that. Prilliman and Rafalowski first met in 1982, when they were both working for American Airlines and dated for three years.

"I helped Paul learn to fly," Prilliman says. "But we decided that we were much better as friends than as lovers."

Prilliman says it's possible that Rafalowski or he might have infected the other because he can count on one hand the number of times he's had high-risk sex, but it isn't a subject they have time to discuss these days. Since Prilliman filed his lawsuit, Rafalowski's mental condition has deteriorated rapidly. Healthy at the time of his dismissal, he now suffers from CMV and is confined to a wheelchair.

Suffering no more than the occasional skin rash himself, Prilliman, with a CD4 count under 50 for the past three years, helps maintain his exceptional health with a combination of acupuncture, vitamins and exercise. He didn't start taking AZT and 3TC until July 1995, almost a year after he was fired.

"To this day, I lead a totally normal life," he says as his cat Sheba mews for attention.

Some days he helps Rafalowski or plays cheerleader on the phone, talking to other people with AIDS. Other days he spends at home in Orange County, California, reading historical novels or playing his white baby grand piano that overlooks a panoramic view of Arch Cove. Dateless for the

past three years and legally married to a woman who lives in Dallas and manages some of his property, Prilliman has played by the book far too long: At least for the time being, he's traded in his pilot's uniform for the proverbial pair of combat boots.

"I've become an activist, and that's given me a reason to go on," he says. "I miss not being able to fly, but I have other interests in which I believe strongly. United's reaction was something I would have expected back in 1985. I'm still capable of functioning, and I want to see a change in United's policies [toward people with HIV] that reflects that fact. After that, I want to get more involved with the gay and HIV communities."

Despite his bitter legal battle, Prilliman isn't bitter about everything that's happened. "I won't buy a ticket on United," he says, "but being bitter isn't healthy."

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