Ruben Rodriguez

50; Brooklyn, New York; 19 years with HIV

June 1, 2001

Survival Secrets

“Most important has been my positive attitude. When I was first diagnosed, I refused to dwell on dying and decided to take care of myself. I stopped drugging, drinking and smoking, exercised, and was always into the vitamin thing. The fact that I got involved in AIDS while in prison has also been important. I wasn’t bothered by the fear of what someone would do to me -- working around HIV, you had to have balls. My big points are that no one should live with this alone. Accept it, and don’t allow it to eat at you.”

Rodriguez spent much of the last two decades in prison and infected with HIV -- and lived to tell about it. In the face of discrimination and brutality against other HIV positive inmates, Rodriguez established AIDS education and support programs in each prison he was sent to, even before he knew his own status. He has continued that work on the outside since his release in 1996.

1981: *Rodriguez is sentenced to 15 years to life for what he calls the “flimsy charge” of attempted burglary, his third conviction.* Over the next two years at New York’s Sing Sing prison, he injected heroin, sharing needles and works. Later, he found out that some of his needle-sharing buddies had died of AIDS.

1983: *In the first of many prison transfers, Rodriguez is moved upstate to Auburn.* “Talk started to circulate about AIDS. I was seeing people get sick -- they were going away and not coming back. I decided to stop using needles, and to snort heroin instead.”

1985-86: *Across New York State, inmates with AIDS are attacked -- one is burned out of his cell; others are taunted or stabbed.* “Medical care was substandard. The attitude of administrators was ’Throw ’em where they won’t be seen.’” Rodriguez became close with a fellow inmate who was HIV positive and, with other inmates falling ill, he began to suspect his own infection. He decided to learn what he could about AIDS, and encouraged inmates to go to the prison hospital to help PWAs write letters, or just to sit and play cards. “The sickness, dying and discrimination struck a nerve among prisoners, who wanted to do something about it.” In 1989, the administration “shipped me out -- as they did with anyone taking leadership.”

1989-91: *In rapid succession, the troublemaker is transferred to Attica, Eastern and Walkill, but he works with inmates at each prison to establish a PACE (Prisoners for AIDS Counseling and*

Education) program. With a potential furlough on the horizon, Rodriguez decided to quit drugs. “It didn’t go with the good work I was doing. I couldn’t go back out to the same old life.”

1993: *Rodriguez finally goes for an HIV test, and comes up positive.* “I guess, up till then, I really didn’t want to know. I was taking care of myself, wasn’t having risky sex or shooting drugs, hadn’t come down with any symptoms, so I didn’t see the need. But I did promise myself that once I was eligible for furloughs, I’d get tested, because I knew I’d get in relationships with women and have sex.” His CD4s at 520, he declined the prison doctor’s suggestion to take AZT. “Everything I read led me to believe it wasn’t necessary yet, especially with all its toxicity.”

1996: *Out on parole, Rodriguez works as a benefits case manager, later becoming a counselor at an alternatives-to-incarceration program.* The next year, with his CD4 count below 400 and “all the stress catching up with me,” Rodriguez started on HAART, eventually switching to his current combo, Crixivan, AZT and 3TC.

1998: *Rodriguez becomes hotline supervisor at the Osborne Association’s AIDS in Prison Project, which offers advocacy and discharge planning for prisoners with HIV.* “This is my life’s work. I see now that everything I did in prison was in preparation for what I’m doing now.”

2001: *Now Rodriguez’s CD4 count is at 720 and his viral load is 30,000.* While he had few side effects early on, he’s now facing fatigue, intense foot pain (he’s on pain meds) and “my sex drive is not as strong.” Overall, he is upbeat. “I do have my ailments, but I expect that -- it’s part of the disease, part of being on meds. But if I can do what I need to do, then I’m good.” As for the prison epidemic, “People aren’t nearly as afraid of AIDS as when we started. Prisoners coming together to help each other forged a sense of community. A lot more are seeking treatment because of the awareness we helped create.”

The AIDS in Prison Project accepts collect calls from prisoners: 718.378.7022.

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