Ship to Shore

Sue Saunders sells safer sex by the seashore

February 1, 1996 By Jay Blotcher

When Sue Saunders learned at 58 that she was HIV positive, it seemed a bitter coda to a life marked by critical parents and an alcoholic, abusive husband she stuck with through 18 years. Even friends offered little solace, telling her, “It’s no big deal; you’re going to die anyway.” Resigned, Saunders left her Fort Lauderdale home to embark upon one final journey to see her four grown children.

Then, during her stop in San Clemente, her son insisted on an extensive examination. The diagnosis: Saunders had several good years ahead. She postponed the rest of her farewell tour. “You get used to the idea you have HIV. Then they tell you you’re gonna live,” she says, her handsome, weathered face offering an ironic grin. "*That* was a bigger shock."

Five years later, Saunders puts little energy into waiting to die; an enthusiastic gardener, she has filled the front and back yards of her Florida bungalow with herbs, corn, tomatoes, pineapples, Ruby Red grapefruit and Honey Bell oranges. Inside Saunders’ home, the driftwood furniture recalls her years on the ocean -- when home was a fishing boat off Bimini Island in the Bahamas, spent with her husband and a first mate named Norris Rolle. On her coffee table, a mayonnaise jar top holds Saunders’ daily dosage of antivirals and vitamins. They go ignored as she talks of her journey from abuse to independence.

After years of beatings, Saunders finally threw her husband out -- realizing later he had drained their bank account and taken the fishing equipment. She spent all her time after the divorce with Rolle, a gentle, charismatic Bahamian man whose twin passions were tuna fishing and jitterbugging. By day they fished, by night they danced.

Saunders returned to Florida in the early ’80s, with Rolle visiting occasionally to repair her boat. She was holding down three jobs by 1989 when a series of ailments began battering her. Saunders was down to 115 pounds by late 1990 and returned to Bimini to learn Rolle was HIV positive. She says he understood little of his condition. “He told me that everything was okay, so long as he wore a condom.” Hospitalized a year later, Rolle finally pulled out his IV and returned home, where relatives sang island hymns at his deathbed.

Saunders confirmed her own HIV status the following May. She sought out Fort Lauderdale’s AIDS services, only to realize her specific needs remained unaddressed. “There are no facilities for

elderly people; here; they really don’t believe that we can get it.” She soon volunteered at her local PWA Coalition.

A self-described loner, Saunders chooses gardening, the gym and movies over support groups. “They’re too depressing,” she says. “It’s a pity party for everybody.” For several months she avoided people she considered focused on death or “obsessed with the virus.” After a severe reaction in 1994 to longtime AZT use, Saunders holds to one health strategy: Moderation. Let others anally infuse bitter melon or take shark cartilage; Saunders will sip that occasional scotch and water, despite doctors’ objections. “’Phooey on you,’ I tell them. If you took away everything you enjoy, that would kill you faster than the disease.”

With her T-cells holding at 700, Saunders recently enjoyed a trip to Costa Rica with her sister. And Saunders’ self-imposed exile from AIDS volunteer work the painful death of a close gay male friend has ended. Last year, she videotaped an interview about living with HIV for the American Association of Retired Persons. The 28-minute tape, *It Can Happen to Me*, which also features a 62-year-old gay Minneapolis minister, a Latina woman from Texas and an African-American senior woman caring for an HIV positive child, is being shown to mature audiences around the country. No one was more surprised than Saunders by the command of knowledge she displayed on the completed tape, but she brushes aside the accomplishment. “I figured I had the disease for a reason, and if it’s to educate other people, well, that’s what I’ll do.” Meanwhile, she’s resumed her work with PWAC and looks forward to starting a gardening business. “You adjust, you grow, you get wiser and stronger -- and you cope.”

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