Soap Dish

I am a real PWA -- and I play one on TV

March 1, 1998 By David Cohen

“If you want my body, baby/All the rest comes with it too,” sings Keith Christopher on his new CD-in-progress, *The Naked Truth.*

The former dancer’s body is unquestionably beautiful. It’s also strong: Christopher, 40, was diagnosed with HIV 15 years ago, when he started bruising and bleeding inexplicably while on the road in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas.* “They thought I had leukemia,” he says of those long-ago GRID days, “but it was ITP.” (ITP -- immune thrombocytopenic purpura -- is a platelet deficiency often associated with HIV.)

Christopher played a dancing football player in *Whorehouse,* but his first love is music. He used to sing backup for his fellow singer/PWA, the late Michael Callen, and like Callen -- who preached safer sex long before anyone in the gay community wanted to hear it -- Christopher’s art led naturally to activism. “In 1995, when I was at my sickest, I made an agreement with God that if I got out of the hospital, I would devote myself to AIDS education and awareness,” he says.

Soon he was cast as a gay man with HIV on the NBC soap opera *Another World.* The news that this openly HIV positive character was being portrayed by an openly HIV positive actor led to talk-show appearances on *The Sally Jesse Raphael Show* and others, and public-speaking engagements at colleges.

It also led to another soap opera -- CBS’ *The Guiding Light* -- and another HIV positive, gay character, Wyatt Sanders. “Wyatt could be any character,” says Christopher. “He just happens to be gay and HIV positive. It could be your neighbor, your daughter, your son. It could be anyone -- because it is.”

Christopher admits that he was ambivalent about being an HIV poster boy. “At first, I didn’t want to be ’that guy with HIV,’ but then I thought, ’This is why I’m here. Why resent it?’” he says.

Recently, Christopher served as the spokesperson for a pharmaceutical company in a series of national radio spots. “Part of me feels like a hypocrite, but I’m secretly thrilled to be making some money off these companies,” he says.

Christopher may be taking their money, but he’s stopped giving them his. He switched from

saquinavir to ritonavir to Crixivan before near-fatal side effects convinced him to cease all antiretrovirals last year. “I was so dizzy and anesthetized that I asked myself, ’At what price survival?’” And with 15 years of survival under his belt, Christopher is more than qualified to pose the question. “I would much rather have a reasonable quality of life -- working on my CD, making love with my boyfriend and having a social life -- than walk around like a zombie with an acceptable viral load,” he says.

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