Surgical Rotations

Dr. Alan Morrison’s headside manner

May 1, 1997 By Shelley Nohowel

Surgery nearly killed me,“ says 30-year-old Alan Morrison as he sinks back into the couch and blows a cloud of steam from his tea. ”I passed out twice in the OR. I wound up in ICU.“ As he recounts the dark days of 1992, Morrison is not talking about being a PWA (though he is one), but of surviving his last two years of medical school. ”I don’t recommend it for anyone," says the Pennsylvania native.

“When I first started med school, my count was below what they consider AIDS, so I figured I’d be cured or dead by the time I got to clinical rotations. When that time came, I was neither.” But he was sick, and it was time to let the school know. “I didn’t really have a choice at that point. I don’t think they were pleased, but they were willing to work with me so I could do what I needed to do professionally. They didn’t kick me out, let’s put it that way. I provide a certain diversity. I’m focused and motivated. Maybe they saw I could do some good in the world.”

Alan Morrison, MD, now a third-year resident in psychiatry, fit me in on a chilly Sunday afternoon between counseling opiate-dependent outpatients and having dinner with his mom. Sensing Morrison might be a bit nervous about making this house call, I suggested he bring his black Labrador along for the ride. Barney is quite a contrast to Morrison’s easy, gentle manner: Wet-nosing his way into every inch of the house, tap-dancing on hardwood floors, unplugging the tape recorder in one joyous swish of the tail. I’m later told this 100-plus pounds of high energy, spite and sweetness is epileptic. He’s still a lucky dog.

At age 17, Morrison fell head over heels for his first true love. That same year, he also fell prey to HIV.

“Emotionally, I gave up a lot -- virtually everything -- to be in this relationship. And when my partner died in 1988, I completely numbed out.” For nearly a decade, Morrison felt nothing and performed like a Rhodes Scholar, graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Penn State University in 1990 and embarking on another eight years of medical and psychiatric training -- still feeling nothing. “School’s been a great cover-up for my emotions,” he says.

In his struggle to deal with his own feelings, Morrison chose psychiatry to help other people deal with theirs. “Almost every gay and lesbian person I’ve talked to was sent to a psychologist or a psychiatrist by their parents when they came out. I was. See how well it worked? I’m still gay,”

Morrison says. “Those professionals can do as much damage to a teen as they can do good. Being gay is not a pathological condition. If I can influence that, that’d be great. To find doctors who are not judgmental is critical.” The same might be said for parents: Five years ago, Morrison and his current partner were introduced by their mothers.

Morrison’s been hard at work during the past several months developing a doctor-patient relationship all his own. Finally, the feelings are coming out. “I’m incorporating my id, getting more real with myself. And as far as emotions go, they wash over me now. It’s really unnerving,” he says. Morrison’s still not quite sure what he’s going to be when he grows down (“I’m down to about age 40. I was 60 or 70”). “If there’s any sense I’ve been able to make out of this life, it’s that people don’t have to give up everything just because they’re sick.”

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