Switching Channels

From couch potato to TV mogul

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For John Edelman, being ill with AIDS in the mid-'90s meant watching TV. Lots of it. "Since I had retired on disability, I mostly stayed home in bed," Edelman says. "There was nothing else to do." But what the former collection-agency director saw on the boob tube disturbed him.

"The more I watched," Edelman says, "the more I found that there wasn't much information on AIDS beyond some twenty-second blurbs that left me thinking, 'Isn't there anything positive about AIDS on television?' I promised that if I ever got better, I'd produce a TV show that was open and honest about AIDS."

And get better the Washington, DC, resident did, brought back to health by a protease combination and Doxil, a drug that successfully attacked his Kaposi's sarcoma (KS). "I sometimes can't believe my own recovery," Edelman says. "But I've got the hair to prove it. While I was on chemotherapy for KS, first my hair turned white, then half of it fell out. Once I even had a circular bald spot on the side of my head. I was too sick to be mad, but I was still mad."

In April 1997, Edelman, with a fuller head of hair, began taking a television production class at DCTV, the local access channel. One hard-worked month later, he had finished the first show of an ongoing series of programs known as DC AIDS Talk. After that show—a profile of a local AIDS service organization—aired in June, Edelman, now 36, says he felt his spirit "renewed."

"I built the idea from scratch," he says, "and now it has grown into something that I think is making a real difference. Just imagine—television can be used positively."

Edelman has since produced programs featuring everything from interviews with local authors to a critique of DC's on-again, off-again ADAP program. DC AIDS Talk has even spawned a spin-off show, Real Talk, which Edelman says is "geared more toward the younger generation. It's a forum where they can talk about their concerns, such as what it's like to date in the age of AIDS."

The growth of DC AIDS Talk, however, hasn't made Edelman lose sight of the viewers he's really trying to reach, an audience of which he was once a member. "First and foremost, I want to get in touch with those out there who are stuck in bed and not feeling good about themselves," he says. "I want them to turn on the TV and say, 'Hey, if he can get on TV, then maybe I can go out and talk

to someone.’”

Edelman hopes to eventually broadcast that feeling beyond the DC area. For now, DC AIDS Talk has put him in touch with hundreds of people, from documentary filmmakers in the United States to the British Broadcasting Corporation, which invited him to participate in a panel discussion about HIV vaccines. “DCTV has been a wonderful starting point,” he says, “but we’re just beginning to reach enough people. I want to get more people talking about it. If we reach a point where people can say, ‘AIDS’ like they can say, ‘Cancer,’ maybe then I’ll take a break.”

Take a break? Not likely. There’s always sweeps week to shoot for.

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