The Grass Is Greener

Brian Heater's a little bit country?

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How does a traditional farm boy live with HIV among the ordered cornfields of Indiana? Aw shucks, just fine, if you're born-again hayseed Brian Heater. Five years ago, the 32-year-old Indiana native returned to restore a grand 127-year-old Italianate house, complete with attic cupola, outside of Tunnelton, pop. 50.

The property belongs to Heater's roommate, Tim, whose family has owned it for generations. But by 1993, it was in a forlorn state of disrepair because it had stood empty for years. Bringing the main house and outbuildings back to their original glory would be no small feat—and a designer's dream. Today, Heater, who studied television graphics at a Florida art school but has since focused on landscaping and interior design, commands an army of carpenters in between tending goats, geese, peacocks and a cow named Linwood. He'll soon have another challenge when 18 heads of cattle move in.

Heater first restored the dilapidated barn and turned it into a uniquely personal statement, adding intricate terraces, hand-carved wooden fencing and flower-covered trellises. "Neighbors say I have the fanciest chicken yard in the state," he says. He has since tackled the main house and boasts that the entire complex will have 22 rooms when completed.

Heater was initially apprehensive about living with HIV in a small town. "It was scary, especially because I felt so isolated," he says. When he got a prescription for Crixivan, Viramune and Combivir, the local pharmacy had none of the treatments in stock. He told the druggist, "Better put in an order now, because you're going to be seeing a lot more of me."

A year later, his CD4 count, viral load and sense of well-being all indicate that the farm/cocktail combo agrees with Heater. He quit partying, goes to bed early and eats right, including plenty of homegrown vegetables. On Sunday, his day off, he often travels one hour south to Louisville, to play doubles tennis with friends. Heater readily admits that life in rural Indiana can be lonely. "The nearest gay bar is an hour away," he says with a sigh, "but now that I don't drink, the scene depresses me. I'd rather be at home curled up with my dog by the fireplace." He falls silent for a moment. "I make my living doing what I love. Not many people can say that," he says.

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