Ties That Bind

Size doesn’t matter when it comes to domestic violence

November 1, 1999 By Tony Mills

I sit as unassumingly as possible on the edge of the stage with my legs dangling. This posture might make my size less obvious, I tell myself. But I fool no one. As people trickle into the small auditorium, I am confronted by the wary eyes of women and men who think they know what I am.

They’ve come to hear me speak on domestic violence, and they suppose I am a “reformed” abuser. As I begin and the slides show me in leather, the tension becomes almost palpable. One photo, however, changes everything. It is a poor-quality Polaroid taken by a nurse in an emergency room. The black eye, the swollen jaw, the broken nose and facial lacerations are images familiar to the audience. A look of shock comes over them as they realize it is me.

At 6-foot-plus and 225 pounds, I thought it could never happen to me. HIV taught me to fight, but that didn’t help me when I was attacked by a man who told me he loved me.

Denial is hard when the evidence stares back from the mirror, but I tried. After the incident earlier this year, I made excuses. I told myself I had angered him. I had allowed resentments to build up. I had not worked enough at communication. I was HIV positive and he was HIV negative—I should have been grateful to have had him in my life at all. I had become the prototypical “battered wife” who refuses to press charges.

As a person with HIV, hope is what keeps me alive. But hope that things would change made me stay in the relationship long after I should have gone. It’s not easy to talk about this, but I have learned in recovery that I can only keep what I have by giving away my story. “Coming out” as a victim of domestic violence, opening up to the support of friends and family and helping those who fight the same demons has been my road out of the pain. If my story is familiar, I am here to assure you that you are not alone.

For me, the most difficult part has been trying to stay away from him. There may always be some part of me that feels I deserve to be hurt. But I have learned that the first time I am hit, I am a victim; the second time, I am a volunteer. And now I realize that I have fought too hard against this virus to risk harm at the hands of someone who doesn’t know what love is.

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