Tomorrow’s “It” Girl

Just try to catch up with Candis Culver

October 1, 1998 By Rachel Sarah

People said Candis Culver and her second husband, Kevin, looked like Barbie and Ken. And you can’t blame them -- this bright Texas gal is a beauty. She started bodybuilding in her 20s, and by 1985 ranked fifth in the world. By 1990, Culver had left the gym, had a baby girl, Brittney, a divorce and a job in air-freight sales that paid more than a hundred grand a year. Then along came a new beau named Kevin, and a marriage proposal in Maui.

But for Culver the dream soon darkened. “Every time we had sex, I would get sick,” she says, recalling swollen lymph nodes and bouts of mono. “And when we didn’t have sex, I was fine.” Her then-doctor ran tests for TB and cat scratch fever. “I had seen the symptoms of AIDS in the newspapers,” she says. “I asked, ’Do you think I could have AIDS?’ He just laughed.”

A few nights later, Culver, in bed with Kevin and the TV on, had her life changed by Mary Fisher, the Republican Party’s most famous PWA. “This pretty woman was talking about the wonderful life she once had -- until she found out her ex-husband was an IV drug user and she had HIV,” Culver says. By then, Culver already knew that Kevin had used IV drugs in the past. “He told me over the bench press at the gym that he had shared many needles,” she says. “I went ballistic, threw the bar down on his chest. I demanded that he get tested, but it came out negative.”

After hearing Fisher, Culver insisted that her doctor test her. “Later, he called me in and said, ’You tested positive for the AIDS virus.’ He had been my doctor for four and a half years, and he was cold as ice. I said, ’What about my daughter? She’s not going to have a mother.’ He told me he didn’t know how to treat someone with AIDS, wrote me a prescription for Xanax and referred me to another doctor.” Culver immediately called Kevin. “We met in the parking lot of What-a-Burger and bawled.” And then? “I went to work the next day and tried to act normal.”

Normal at AIT Freight Systems meant laughing along with coworkers at jokes made about just-out-with-HIV Magic Johnson. “I was such an actress,” Culver says. “The only place I could really show my feelings was in the shower. That was where I could cry.” Culver kept her HIV status a secret. At one point, she confided in her dentist, who then refused to work on her teeth. From then on, if anyone asked why she was sick, Culver said it was cancer.

But last year, Culver stopped pretending. The toughest part of telling the world, she says, was starting with her daughter. Now there’s no end in sight. Just last year, she separated from Kevin

and left AIT. She’s a year shy of 40; Brittney’s 10.

Looking at Culver now, I realize that the Barbie-and-Ken image misses the point. Culver’s one strong woman. She may have abandoned her actress mode, but now, six years after her diagnosis, she’s out to be a prime-time player. “I’m ready to make my mark,” she says. “I want to talk to people, to give. And I’ll do it for free if they’ll just listen.” Heads up, Ms. Fisher -- there’s a new girl in town.

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