Touchdown

A Midwestern pee-wee football coach loses his job to HIV stigma-but the team's parents get him back in the game

December 1, 2003 By Jim Farmer

When football coach Stephen Derrig was fired in August 2003 for having AIDS, his story seemed to fit neatly into a stereotype of Midwestern Parent Teacher Association intolerance. But the parents in his suburban Akron, Ohio, community were the first to intercept the pass and take up his defense. The case made national noise—and within days of his dismissal, Derrig, 36, found himself telling his story to Katie Couric on *Today*. Despite the persistence—or resurgence—of HIV stigma, this story has a happy ending, one that may reflect 20 years of public education by out-and-proud HIVers: Derrig got his job back.

An all-American jock with a wife and kids, the openly positive Derrig says he got HIV at work as a paramedic and firefighter several years ago. Just before starting as assistant coach for his son's pee-wee football team in August, Derrig was told by the league's director, Dan Gable, that "parents would worry" his HIV could endanger the 7-and-8-year-old players. "I was shocked," Derrig said. "Never did I think there would be concern because of this." The next day, the Ellet Suburban Youth Football League sacked him. Gable, who did not return phone calls to *POZ*, told the *Akron Beacon Journal* he had received anonymous calls from parents worried about Derrig having contact with their children. But Derrig said, "It really wasn't the parents who didn't want me to coach—it seemed to be a few individuals higher up. The parents were extremely supportive of me."

Parent Lisa Geer, whose husband had coached with Derrig, said, "Most all of us were in disbelief when we heard. I work in the medical field and know how the disease is spread." At what Geer calls a "rather heated" board meeting, she and others voiced their disapproval. "With the exception of about four [parents], everyone disagreed with what had happened." After a lawyer and a medical expert told the board that spreading the virus through coaching is virtually impossible, it reversed the decision—stipulating that parents sign a waiver stating that they knew Derrig's HIV status.

Chances are they had known since last year, when Derrig tackled HIV stigma in his hometown by telling his story to a *Beacon Journal* reporter. In 2000, he grew seriously ill and doctors feared he would die, yet none could nail a diagnosis until he was finally tested for HIV—and discovered he had AIDS. He recovered and worked until a few months ago, when he won worker's compensation and retired. He and his wife, Melissa, who is HIV negative, now talk about writing a book.

According to Paul Feldman of the National Association of People With AIDS, HIV discrimination is alive and well. Just this year, a Cirque du Soleil acrobat was fired because of his HIV, a Nevada HIVer was barred from his mobile-home park's swimming pool, and a diplomat with AIDS was denied a job by the Foreign Service. Feldman hopes the publicity of Derrig's reinstatement will help. "Every time the world sees that people with HIV such as Stephen Derrig are able to participate in their community, it's great."

Derrig's son, Alec, was especially inspired. During the controversy, the 8 year old gave his father a note. "It was written in an orange crayon—the team color—'I hope you can be my couch,'" Derrig said. "He'd misspelled *coach*. Needless to say, he was ecstatic when I showed up for practice."

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