# Trailblazer

Dawn Averitt takes a hike -- again

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It’s amazing what it takes to drop out of life for six months,“ Dawn Averitt says on a break between training sessions for a half-year trek along the Appalachian Trail. ”Or drop *in*. After 10 years of living with this disease, it’s time I held myself accountable for all the advice I’ve given women to realize their dreams."

The goal that 30-year-old Averitt, founder of the treatment advocacy group Women’s Information Services and Exchange (WISE) in Atlanta, has set for herself is formidable. And while Averitt jokes about lying low during the 2,200-mile journey, she has launched a public-awareness campaign about HIV to coincide with the June trip. Drug drops and peer-ed publicity powwows will only complicate the trail that a mere 10 percent of hikers manage to complete, but then Averitt has always defied expectations.

Meeting her for the first time in Yokohama, Japan, at 1994’s 10th International Conference on AIDS, I glommed onto Averitt because she could translate all that AIDSpeak. Little did I know that it was new to her as well.

Averitt was then the new treatment resource specialist for Atlanta’s AIDS Survival Project. She took the job with admittedly little HIV knowledge -- beyond what came from testing positive in 1988 at age 18 -- from Washington, DC, where she had served as a senator’s aide. “I was working for Sam Nunn in the midst of the gays-in-the-military thing. Here I was, an HIV positive woman at the receiving end of ACT UP and Queer Nation,” Averitt says. “They kept telling me to go back to my little world. Nobody knew.”

Averitt had returned to Atlanta to apply her Capitol skills to the public sector. At the time, she says, “I knew five things about HIV: that I had it, that more T-cells were better than less, that there was a drug called AZT that might work for me but not forever, that HIV caused AIDS, and that I was probably going to die of it. The learning curve was steep.”

It was 1994, protease inhibitors were still in the pipeline, and Averitt’s T-cell count kept dropping by half with each passing month. Her last count before Japan was 74, and her viral load was almost 100,000. “I was a fast progressor, and I needed information and resources to survive,” she says.

But in Japan she found that every presentation lacked data on women. This disappointment steeled her to become an advocate at home. She started with a bang -- by giving birth to WISE to get treatment info into women's hands. "I wrote my first grant because I didn't know I couldn't," she recalls. "It was one night sandwiched between meetings at the NIH and the FDA -- just like the papers I wrote in school. I had no idea what I was getting into."

Averitt was soon living at 35,000 feet, hopping from conference forum to industry meeting and racking up not only frequent-flier miles but pointers in the push-and-shove among activists. "We had the turf wars between the East and West coasts," she says. "But I fit in because I was from Atlanta." There was, however, another conflict. "I was specifically interested in treatment information, and that was the boys' club," she says. "The girls asked me what I was doing with *them*. But I'll tell you, the boys taught me."

WISE thrived, and Averitt's star rose. In April 1997, Averitt agreed that WISE would be bigger and better as a division of San Francisco's Project Inform, and soon after overseeing the merge, she made what she calls her hardest decision ever: She left WISE and moved to North Carolina.

Averitt then zeroed in on hiking the trail she always said she'd do one day. It is, she says, part of her plan to survive AIDS. "This is a year I wasn't supposed to have," she says. "If the world was flat, age 30 was the edge. When I found that the world isn't flat, it was scary."

Joining her is her youngest brother, her friend Brad and her dog, Guinness. "He's up to the challenge," Averitt says of her canine compadre. "He trains with us and carries his own pack."

Averitt's own pack includes her arsenal of Sustiva, Fortovase, Norvir, ddI and hydroxyurea. This regimen, her third, is grueling, but she says it's just part of the battle. "I'm still your classic salvage patient, if you ask the treaters," she says. "But I can't think of a better way to spend the last six months of the century."

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