Trick Questions

An HIV positive prostitute spills all

February 1, 1997 By Hal Rubenstein

Derek is sorry to be a little late, but he has an excuse. Seems just before he left his house to meet me, someone had called regarding his ad in the classified section of LA's *Frontiers* magazine proclaiming his availability as an HIV positive prostitute. The guy wasn't calling for himself, but for a friend possessed by demons. In order to exorcise these demons, the man said, he needed to be infected with the virus. Derek replied that he had a previous engagement -- with me -- but that he'd call him later.

Derek says, "I'm not your average prostitute." I'm not about to argue. He's no beauty. Cute, but we're hardly short of breath. Skinny arms. No swagger. No sightly bulges. Bruce Weber ain't whisking him anywhere.

Derek is, however, a beguiling smart-ass, pragmatic and funny, a rosy-cheeked Midwesterner who didn't go West with false dreams. About his profession he is as practical as an accountant on April 14, compassionate toward his clients, wry and savvy about the sexual intrigue that propels his brethren. He's on a singular mission to make others more aware of HIV and AIDS. Though Derek's other, more lucrative classified ad (under another name) takes a different, less revelatory approach, it too is no litany of inches. Derek's versatility is verbal, his dominance psychological, his seductiveness analytical. He didn't undress for me -- *POZ* wouldn't expense it -- so I can't report how big a piece is his resistance, but one thing I could tell: Mentally, Derek is hung.

Hal Rubenstein: Just a wild guess, but were you hustling long before you were HIV positive?

Derek: I took that ad out about two years ago, but back in Minnesota, I was turning tricks on the street at 19. I'm 28 now. Like many people's first experience in the business, somebody offered me an exorbitant amount of money while I was out cruising. And like many people, it took years before someone offered me that amount again. A hundred bucks back then was Ohmigod stuff. And it was fun. I liked the guy.

Hustling became a hobby on the weekends, when I was short on cash or horny. I'd have done it for free if folks hadn't been willing [to pay]. But you can't work the streets of Minnesota for long -- not in the winter. So I got hooked up with a massage parlor. Worked indoors, two shifts a week, six clients at $30 a pop.

H: You said you liked the first guy? How many did you like after that?

D: Want to know why I'm so good at my job? I always find something about my clients that I like. Very seldom do I feel it's so horrible I can't stay. A long time ago, before I even thought about prostitution, I realized that I didn't care what people looked like; looks aren't part of my criteria for sex. It's an attitude that sure has come in handy as a prostitute. I respond more to aura and energy. Someone might be generous, creative, odd or handsome. But everybody really does have something wonderful about them.

H: That's sweet.

D: That's why I can do this, and you can't.

H: And you have safe sex all the time?

D: I've almost always had safe sex with all my clients. Now I [always] do, despite the phone call.

H: When did you find out about your status?

D: About six years ago.

H: Did you ever consider that you shouldn't be doing this anymore?

D: I did for a while. Especially when I came to LA, and several of the agencies ask for your HIV status on their applications. They told me it was because it was a felony to be an HIV prostitute. I didn't know if it was true, but I lied, because as long as you're having safe sex, it's a moot point.

H: Then why did you bother taking the ad out as Derek?

D: As an HIV positive prostitute, I'm in a unique position to help. I'm willing to tell the truth to a certain group of people when no one else is. I also took the ad in the hopes of intriguing other HIV positive prostitutes and forming a support group, so that we could get together and talk about the two secrets we have: Our HIV status and what caused us to become prostitutes.

H: Did that happen?

D: No. But I don't think it's because of HIV's stigma as much as it is that prostitutes aren't joiners. Their profession dictates a certain kind of separateness, so they are not accustomed to being part of any group. One called me, freaked out about being turned down by an agency for telling the truth [about his positive status]. We talked for a half hour and ended up dating for a while. He was a nurse with a high mortgage, so he was doing this on the side. He was surprised at how uninformed people are in the industry. Agencies find it a lot easier to make money if they can say that all their boys are negative, especially since, I think, people want to have unsafe sex, or fantasize about having it, and it's easier to achieve that fantasy imagining it with a negative prostitute.

H: But isn't prostitution supposed to be out of the realm of daily life? Isn't it about fantasy? And HIV slams it back to earth.

D: It's fantasy only for those who use prostitutes to escape or for a thrill. But there are often other fantasies at work. One is that "this prostitute is going to fall in love with me and we're going to build something beautiful and live our lives together." Then there are those who need prostitutes to make their reality bearable. This is the reason I took out the ad. I wanted to be the one person who could approach a disenfranchised and confused HIV person and [help that person] take the initiative to make himself a better life.

H: Yeah, but how many people are desperately seeking a prostitute on a mission?

D: True, most prostitutes are doing a fantasy show: Let's perform, jack off, show what things look like. But I really try to connect with all my clients. Find out what's missing, why they want to use a prostitute, why they aren't competing in the regular sexual arena. And draw out whatever is hurting.

H: Do you really think I would call you up to relieve the pain?

D: But you're fundamentally different than the person who calls me regularly. When you're single, where do you meet guys? Clubs, bars, parties, the gym. You're involved in the sexual arena. An ideal sexual experience for you is the classic hustler ad: 19-inch arms, 48-inch chest, 29-inch waist, bubble butt. In the dating world, guys sit around and brag about the details. My clients are never in that situation. They don't have a lot of sexual contact, make jokes about it or discuss sex casually. Whatever the reason -- unattractive, shy, straight, busy with their jobs -- they're not part of the conventional dating pool.

H: But it doesn't say in either ad that you're going to give a lecture and provide heretofore-withheld empathy.

D: But I do.

H: And you don't get anyone who says, "Hey, who asked for this? I thought I was getting a blow job."

D: First of all, neither of my ads is geared that way. It doesn't say, "Big stud with a huge cock, come and get it." My ad is clever: A couple of good jokes, some funny wordplay. Most people tell me I have a sense of humor when they call. It's obvious that an intelligent person wrote this. It's deliberately geared toward a specific client: One who doesn't necessarily want a circus act.

What I've found in my career is that, for the people I meet, sex is cursory. Most clients -- even the ones who want the dog-and-pony show -- really want is attention. A lot of clients, especially the repeat ones, want to go to dinner. They want to build a relationship where there will be no surprises, where for a time they will be safe. That's what a lot of prostitution is about. In a romantic relationship, you're never sure about what you're going to get. And you never know what it's going to cost you. With me, after the first time, you always know both. A fixed fee, a good mood and constant appreciation.

H: How do you know they'll feel comfortable with this kind of momentary intimacy?

D: I've recently discovered something I have in common with my clients: We share this sense of isolation, which makes it easier for me to come in and be a part of their world. In fact, for lots of my clients, I am their only connection to safe-sex information, because they are not involved in the bar or dating scene. It winds up that out of the hour, maybe 10 minutes is sex. It's really about consolation instead of isolation.

H: Do you also tell the ones who respond to the regular ad about your HIV status?

D: Absolutely not.

H: What if they ask you?

D: I lie. I'm really sorry, but I have to. I would make no money, and I would be disabled from being able to help them. I admit it's a bit of a rationalization, but I'm really good at what I do, and I don't have any other skills.

Besides, if someone asks me about my HIV status in a sexual situation, they don't deserve to know. Because that means they're going to make a decision about what they want to do based upon my answer, which proves they are not ready for the information, because I shouldn't be the deciding factor about whether they want to have sex. You can ask anybody. They could be lying. I assume everyone is. I assume they are. And when a client asks me, I give them this rap. There is no reason to ever ask. You should always assume you're putting yourself at risk.

H: What's the response when you tell a client this?

D: Maybe because I'm really clinical, very specific and not shy about telling anyone, they often say I'm exactly right. I'm really pretty good at explaining things. But some are in such denial. Sometimes I tell them what they should be doing is sexualizing, eroticizing safe sex. Masturbate with rubbers. Make this a goal.

I think a lot of people want to have unsafe sex again, and by asking the status, it gets them closer to this goal. Keep fantasizing about unsafe sex, and given enough drugs and alcohol, you're going to get there.

H: You're so clear about this. Why don't you get a job with APLA (AIDS Project Los Angeles) or the Shanti Project?

D: Oh, do they pay $120 an hour? Might be nice. Maybe that's what I'll do when I retire.

H: Couldn't you reach more people that way, though, if you're on such a mission?

D: But I reach people others can't get to. These people don't go there.

H: How much longer do you think you can do this?

D: I just recently considered getting out of it. Not because I think there is a time limit on it. I'm asymptomatic. I take my antivirals. And the clients I've got will stay with me until the end of time. But I do have a clock ticking, and I'd really better have something else in place just in case that KS

lesion shows up. Plus, I'm really tired of being separate from the rest of society. I would like to integrate. Feel more a part of things.

H: Do your friends know?

D: Very few. And even the ones who do know see me as sort of separate, and forgive rather than embrace. Or accept rather than appreciate. Few people know both of my secrets, and they're cool, but they've been screened for months.

H: What about those you date? How do they handle your forthrightness?

D: Well, the classic routine is that they're very hip and cosmopolitan when I tell them: "Oh, that's not a problem, I don't care about monogamy." About a month later, weird things start to happen. Communications are impeded, strange flare-ups of emotion that don't make sense occur. I know what's going on, but they haven't figured it out yet. Another month later, they leave because they can't cope. Luckily, I know it's coming.

Monogamy's worked in my life. I believe in loyalty. That's incredibly important. But so many people have a fixed image of what a relationship is supposed to be like, and prostitution can't fit into it, no matter how open and liberal they want to be.

H: Are you really going to leave here and enjoin that demonized fellow?

D: I haven't decided how I'm going to handle this or if I'm going to go over at all. Or if the police need to be informed. I'm thinking of going to see if a person has been tied up or if he is in danger.

H: Don't you think the person most likely to be in danger is you? You don't have enough information. Is your beneficence misplaced here?

D: This guy who called could be pulling my leg, or, though I think it's weird, his friend's fear could be very real to him. If that's it, I feel it's my duty to slap them awake. I'm not the prostitute who's ever going to fall in love with them. I know I'd make more if I fortified fantasies, but that's not good for my business. I can't help anyone if I'm not honest with them. If I had any discipline, I'd get a degree and become a therapist. Hey, you know, then I could make that $120 a hour.

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