Tucker: The Man and His Dream

He beats the odds behind the walls

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Mark Tucker lives inside a six-by-nine-foot cell with a man he barely knows. Presence has not made the heart grow fonder.

He's been in prison for a year, he says, because he tried to break up a fight between two friends. The police had a different version, and Tucker was convicted of assault and battery.

Tucker is no newcomer to prison stripes. In fact, it was during a 1992 stint behind bars for drugs that Tucker tested positive for HIV. "The doctor called me into his office and said, 'The good news is you don't have AIDS. The bad news is you have HIV and five years to live.'"

Tucker returned to his cell with the doc's prediction ringing in his ears, but his lips were sealed. He knew that if he showed his sorrow and anger to the other inmates, he would be ostracized. But eventually the pain of hiding -- not to mention the impossibility of covering up nurses visiting at pill time -- outweighed the fright. Tucker began to share. At the same time, he began shaking drug addictions he'd had since age 13.

These days he calls someone who abuses drugs -- or who harasses an inmate with HIV -- an "ill figure." There's nothing he dislikes more than other inmates spouting ignorance.

"Guys will be talking shit about someone in the unit with AIDS," he says, "and they don't even realize I have it." But not for long. Tucker finds that when he shares his own story, inmates react with shock -- if it happened to him, it could happen to them.

Tucker is popular with the prison staff, who made him a "worker," cleaning tables in the unit. This may not be Queen for a Day, but it gets him out of his cell. Other than this, Tucker leads an incredibly regimented life. Meals are eaten at the same time every day, and for exactly 20 minutes. As for meds, the pills are delivered by a nurse, one dose at a time. Unlike many HIV positive prisoners, Tucker sees this as a plus, since he might otherwise forget to take them. But there are minuses. Tucker must hoard boxes of orange juice to help the medicine go down and buy snacks at the canteen to follow his after-dinner (at 4 p.m.) dose.

Tucker's dream is a speedy release so that he can rejoin his girlfriend and son. Meantime, he learns patience, the prisoner's hardest lesson, and looks on the bright side. "Every day you have a

chance to do something good with your life," he says. Maybe this sunny determination will warm up his cellmate.

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