Unhappy Meal

An HIVer boycotts Big Macs after his bout with McDiscrimination

February 1, 2004 By Lucile Scott

Who: Russell Rich
What: protests McDonald's
Where: Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio
When: 11.22.03

He spent 21 years climbing the corporate arches of McDonald's. But after disclosing his HIV status, manager Russell Rich, 40, found himself unemployed, uninsured and feeling suicidal. In 2003, an appellate court overturned his $5 million victory against the burger behemoth. But now he's appealing—and protesting to garner honks for HIV justice.

I began working at McDonald's when I was 13. After testing positive at 25, I threw myself into my job. I was promoted to corporate manager at 33, but 10 days later, I was hospitalized for possible meningitis. My new supervisor visited and asked the nurse lots of questions. Then, McDonald's HR told me they needed to review my medical records. Not realizing they had no legal right to my charts, I admitted I had AIDS. Soon after, I was told that my new McDonald's-owned insurance no longer covered my HIV meds. At work, they scheduled me for 12-hour shifts and told me that I'd be working the counter from then on. I gave my notice a few days later.

I was devastated. I'd considered McDonald's people my family. I went without meds for three months and nearly died. One day, I closed my garage and sat in my car with the engine running. Then I thought, "I'm not going to let McDonald's do this to me." I filed the suit—and McDonald's argued it had no idea I had AIDS. When I won $5 million, I cried. Even though it's been revoked, I believe I'll prevail in my appeal.

My friends and I have organized three protests at various McDonald's in Ohio. Our goal is to educate—and get McDonald's to admit that firing an HIVer is wrong. People have pulled over, asked questions and told me they'll never go to McDonald's again. Money is a goal, but I feel I've already been victorious by drawing attention to the cause. At the latest protest, a sign said "Education cures ignorance." At McDonald's, I think ignorance is on the menu.

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