Who’s the Boss

Spencer Cox has survived HIV—but can he survive the manager from hell?

February 1, 2007 By Spencer Cox

Work is important when you have HIV. Partly, of course, because many of us get our health insurance through work, but it’s important for the head as well: A job provides structure to the day, someplace where you’re needed.

I learned this the hard way. For several years when I was sick, I had to quit work and live off my disability insurance. Disability is like living in the Land of the Lotus Eaters. Time just kind of...passes. Except for the occasional doctor’s appointment, you don’t really have anywhere you need to be or anything you need to do. Money is tight, so it’s not like a continual vacation. There’s a lot of daytime television involved.

And so, after several years of *All My Children*, I felt well enough to take a job in medical public relations. Having spent my whole life working in nonprofit organizations, I wanted to see what it was like to make some real money for a change. And I did—and it was lovely. But suddenly, I had a new problem.

The salary came with 24-hour connectitude. My bosses at the company, which, for the sake of discretion, we’ll call Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here LLC, would call during my lunch break. They would call after hours and on weekends. If they couldn’t call, they would send text messages. You would think we were working to prevent North Korea from nuking us, but dude—it was only public relations. Some people, I guess, enjoy that feeling of messages constantly coming at them. But it made me feel like Tippi Hedren in that climactic scene in *The Birds*, when the birds keep flying at her face and she can’t beat them away fast enough.

The company’s owner—let’s call her Skeletor—had a tendency to drunk-dial. She’d drunk-dial anyone: journalists, clients, me. She also thought the staff could read her mind and anticipate her every whim without her having to actually verbalize it. My mantra became: “I can do this without throwing up. I can do this without throwing up.” The job was harder on my stomach than liquid Norvir. A friend told me that you should stay at a job for two years, but after a year and a half, I practically had to gnaw off my own leg to free myself from her shackles.

It was a phone call that finished it for me. A hysterical phone call. On my first day of vacation. Apparently, someone couldn’t find a document on the computer server. That call made me realize

that I didn’t want to live this way. I mean, I hadn’t fought my way back from AIDS to spend my weekends besieged by e-mails with every subject line declaring EMERGENCY!!!!! or to take drunken, maudlin phone calls from Skeletor at odd hours. Sure, I needed the structure of a job, but I also needed time for me.

And so, in 2005, I quit. I started a nonprofit, doing gay men’s health advocacy. Running my own business is hard. I learn as I go along. Money goes out as fast as it comes in. There’s no dental plan. When I get old, I’ll probably have to retire to a box under the Manhattan Bridge. And despite what some people think, there isn’t much support out there for gay men’s health.

But mostly, I enjoy what I do. I like and respect most of the people I deal with. And when I’m off work, I’m off work. The best part? I still get to catch the occasional episode of *Passions*.

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