With Honors

A college-bound HIVer scores a noble scholarship

August 1, 2004 By Nick Burns

Who: Stephanie Abrams
What: Scholarship Ceremony
Where: Chicago
When: 05.16.04

Diagnosed in eighth grade, Stephanie Abrams, 18, lived a real-life HIV after-school special. Having concealed her status through her adolescence, she has finally decided to come out as positive. On May 16, Canticle Ministries, an AIDS-service organization, awarded her a renewable $3,000 scholarship for her achievements and survival.

The awards gala was something I'd never experienced—I wasn't judged for being different. Onstage, I felt weird because I never had anybody to talk to about HIV, and I was applauded for having it and not letting it get me down.

When I was younger, nobody talked about sex in my house. After my first intimate experience, at 12, my school counselor sent me to a clinic, where they tested me but never gave me the results. Nine months later and living in a new house, they told me that I was actually positive and my file had been lost. My mom began washing my clothes separately, and Dad wouldn't talk to me for a while. By then, I had a new boyfriend. When I told him I was positive, he tried to kill himself.

Some kids at my new junior high found out why my ex attempted suicide and started gossiping about my status. I denied it and was even ready to fight one girl. The rumors got so bad that a patient advocate came to educate my classmates about HIV. High school wasn't as bad—I was an all-star basketball player with good grades, so nobody really said anything except when I missed classes because of med side effects.

My social worker urged me to apply for the Canticle scholarship for college-bound HIVers. I'll attend Chicago Heights' Prairie State College and want to major in nursing and psychology, then go to medical school. Maybe when I become a surgeon, society won't look down on people with HIV. I want to start my own scholarship one day and give people the same hope.

At the awards ceremony, my mom and dad didn't feel so alone. They sat with other families dealing with positive children. It's nice to know you're not the only one.

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