The Freshman

September 1, 2008

Two weeks after my fiancé died of AIDS and several months after my own HIV diagnosis, I went to work in the travel industry. The year: 1986. My age: 25. I channeled my grief into a passion for my job, which involved plotting European tours for every conceivable club, guild and professional association. The job, I guess, was a form of denial, which worked for a long time—until I got sick. Very sick. I think that if I hadn't almost died of a reaction to my meds, I wouldn't have experienced a blindingly clear realization: My ultimate goal was to finally complete my college education, which I'd abandoned.

It took me a while to make the first move—but in 2005, sick, weak and unemployed, I applied to Rutgers University, in New Brunswick, New Jersey. I had no clue whether any of my former college credits were still valid. The process of applying to school was so hard that I almost gave up. Collecting all my high school and college transcripts, filling out forms and writing essays about why, at 43, I wanted to return to school reminded me of the boot-camp-like nightmare of disability paperwork.

When my acceptance letter came, I was overjoyed—and terrified. Would I look ridiculous walking through campus and sitting in classes with kids who could be my children? Would my aging brain be able to study and retain information? What did I really want to do with the rest of my life? And how in God's name would I pay for all this?

My first day of registration was a disaster. While stepping off a curb, I fell and broke my ankle. My right ankle…you know, the one you drive with? Was this an omen? I thought that maybe I should just hang it up right then and there. My guardian angel wouldn't hear of it. Digging dip into my Italian Jersey-girl personality, I found campus advisors who steered me through the bureaucracy.

Sure, getting lost on campus is frustrating. I've always had a bad sense of direction, but now that I'm older, I sometimes can't find a classroom or I forget where I parked my car. It's pretty embarrassing. Thank God for the campus information hotline I programmed in my cell phone! We didn't have anything like that back in the '80s, when I took my first stab at college. Whenever I get lost now, I just put my pride aside and admit it. I'm amazed by how much the kids want to help me. They talk about their own mothers going back to school (Ugh, I feel so old when they do that!) and they cheer me on. They even open doors and let me cut in front of them at the dining hall. I'm not ashamed or embarrassed at all. Hey, I take the support wherever I can get it now.

The students look so young and full of hope. I warn them (as my parents tried to warn me) to stay

in school no matter how difficult it seems, because it only gets more difficult as you get older. They seem to appreciate my concern, and a few have even asked me whether I needed help with anything—but if someone asks to carry my books, I may just lose it! For now, though, I treasure their concern.

In one of my classes, I had to read Dante's "Inferno." I started to cry when I recognized the allegory that we all must go through our own hell to get to paradise. In the book, Dante travels through many levels of hell, fighting demons that are powerless to hurt him—as long as he completely trusts his guardian-angel guide.

Last semester, I declared my major: political science. Since I'm somewhat involved in HIV policy, I realized that I could use my experiences of living with HIV for something other than my own survival. Instead of just reading, signing alerts and contacting my representatives, perhaps I could help shape AIDS policy. It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it. And though it may take me a while to graduate, I'm not worried. I'm enjoying the journey. And when I finally do hold that precious diploma, I'll smile—and thank my guide.

(Click here to visit Annette's POZ blog.)

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