Bite Me

Even a tiny risk is still a risk

October 1, 1997 By Stephen Beachy

I work as a “substitute paraprofessional” for the San Francisco School District - just one of my many jobs. You can call me a teacher’s aide. This means I get sent to special-ed classrooms all over the city.

I work most often at an elementary school on a hill above the Castro. I’m there a lot because the burnout level is high among the regular aides, and other substitutes avoid the place. I stop for breakfast in the Castro and have my overpriced yet delicious coffee and scone. Then I hike up the hill and into the world of SED children and their overstressed teachers. SED means severely emotionally disturbed.

A typical day: Chairs fly across the room; six- and seven-year-olds scream things like asshole, faggot, puta; they hit and kick each other and their teachers; they have to be restrained. But all things considered, this is a good school. Beneath the weird atmosphere of chaos and contagious behavior problems are a lot of very bright but confused kids.

One day last week a third-grader recited a list of things that “ruled” and things that “sucked” as I led him to the time-out room. According to him, teachers suck, his particular teacher sucks, rules suck, schools suck - all the predictable things. What ruled were gangs, violence, cigarettes, killing your family...

It rarely occurs to me that I have a particular relationship to any of this because I’m HIV positive.

One day a new girl came to class and a boy murmured, “She looks like she’s gay. She looks like she has AIDS.”

I told him, “You can’t tell if somebody has AIDS.”

“I can,” he responded confidently.

I could have blown a whistle and shouted, “Act up, fight back, fight AIDS!” at the child, but education quickly took a back seat to easing this girl into a threatening environment. Relative to the other emotional problems of these kids, their AIDSphobia and my own hurt feelings or

righteous anger didn’t seem much of an issue.

Fortunately, in liberal San Francisco it has never even occurred to me that being positive may mean I shouldn’t work with kids. But these kids fight. I sometimes have to physically restrain them. They kick and scratch. Years ago, before I was positive, I worked with developmentally disabled children in Iowa, and a particularly nasty little 11-year-old bit me. It broke the skin. I went to the hospital, got my shots, thoroughly cleaned out the wound. It was annoying, but that’s all.

Well, biting isn’t generally the “style-o,” as the kids say, around this school; most of these kids are a little bit butcher than that. But the other day, in the kindergarten class, I was paired with the lowest-functioning, most wrongly placed student in the class. This 4-year-old is attracted to men with glasses; I was the most readily available that day. Which means that most of the time he simply says, “I-bibibibibibi,” gestures for me to pick him up and gazes at me as if he’s in love and I’m profoundly beautiful.

But it also means that whenever his slightly autistic universe gets disordered, I receive the brunt of his wrath. And he is bitter.

“What if…?” my doubt begins. What if he bit and broke the skin? What about that horrible moment when I would have to reveal to everyone that this annoying incident is actually a potential tragedy? What about this four-year-old boy’s future? His family’s? What about the lawsuits, the horrible publicity, the squealing Religious Right?

Fortunately, he’s not especially quick, and dodging his attempted bites has so far never been even mildly difficult. He’s never successfully bitten anyone else, either. But it frightens me just a little. My political history insists that HIV positive people can do everything anyone else can do, that the transmission risk is so minor that it’s a nonissue and that my HIV status is nobody else’s business.

But I ask myself, sometimes, if this is some twisted form of selfishness and denial masking as politics. I wonder if the most political thing to do would be to declare my status and say that I don’t want to work with this particular boy because of the risk, however small.

But I do want to work with this boy. His affection is gratifying. His class is my favorite in the entire district. So I continue, but remain especially alert. I wear long-sleeve shirts, except on the hottest days. And I tell myself that it’s more about my own paranoia than about actual risk. Isn’t it?

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