Brace Yourself

Sepherson Landers straightens out his life, starting with his teeth

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“Brace-face!” “Metal-mouth!” “Tin-grin!” An unpleasant blast from the past for many people who spent their adolescence with a mouthful of corrective steel girders, but for Sepherson Landers, those taunts are a ticket to the future.

“Projection is 100 percent of reality, and I’ve made a commitment to plan for my future,” says Landers, 33.

Today’s plastic orthodonture is less unsightly than the railroad tracks of yesteryear, but braces are braces, and Landers’ smiles-which he flashes frequently these days-is full of them. He also has a “rapid palate expander,” which forces a crack down the middle of his palate and is slowly expanding his mouth in an effort to pull his teeth into perfect shape.

A painful process, and a long one-a real shift for Landers, who’d lived moment to moment since his HIV diagnosis in 1990. Forget retirement accounts or long-term investments-Landers wouldn’t buy a compact disc because he was afraid that its popularity would outlive him.

Unlike many tales of HIV turnaround, Lander doesn’t owe his new-found hope to protease inhibitors. In fact, Crixivan caused him serious liver complications, and the diarrhea he got from Viracept was debilitating. “I was fighting as best I could,” he says of sicker days that forced him into disability from his customer-service job at American Airlines, “but I wasn’t rebounding like many of my friends were. There was no place to look but down.”

That’s when Landers stopped waiting to die. “Last summer, I decided that something had to change,” he says. “I couldn’t continue planning for my death.”

His plan for the future started with a spiritual renewal. Landers joined the Cathedral of Hope, the world’s largest gay and lesbian congregation. Soon, he was lifting his voice in song with Positive Voices, the Dallas-based, all HIV positive choir.

Finally, inspired by an orthodontist’s ad on a bus, Landers was ready to put his money where his mouth was. “I’d always wanted braces,” Landers says, “ and I realized that this would be an outward sign to myself and others that I plan to be here for a long time. I will need my teeth, and I

want them straight.”

Even though the protease inhibitors didn’t work for Landers-whose CD4 count is currently around 300-he is optimistic. “I’m planning for my future by being better informed, and by getting things accomplished with a different attitude.” His Positive Voices performance schedule and checkups at the orthodontist keep Landers busy, but he finds time to browse at the local record store and sometimes make a purchase. “Just because I’m HIV positive doesn’t mean I can’t have the things I want. My answer now is always, ’Yes I can!’” Landers says. “Anyone want to see my CD collection?”

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