

Brace Yourself

Sepherson Landers straightens out his life, starting with his teeth

December 1, 1997 By Bob Pelham

“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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