Divine Intervention

POZ asked readers: How did HIV change your life? A woman of faith living with the virus shares her story of love and loss.

November 25, 2019 By Pamela De Walt-Yelsky

It was April 2, 1988. I'd just met my future husband, Jerry, at a birthday lunch for a very good friend of mine. He was her boss. A couple of weeks passed before he worked up the courage to ask her for my phone number.

Shortly after that initial meeting, I became quite ill. At the end of a three-week roller-coaster ride at a local hospital, I was diagnosed with Epstein-Barr virus, which has been investigated as a cause of chronic fatigue syndrome. I was told to slow down, eat better, work less and get more sleep.

After initially being told that I possibly had lupus or leukemia, I was thrilled to hear that I didn't have anything life threatening. I asked my treating physician if he'd tested me for HIV—he laughed and said, "There's no reason to. You're not in a high-risk group." I thought, "Divine intervention!"

Although we met in April, it was early September before Jerry and I had our first date. During dinner that evening, Jerry talked at length about his divorce four years earlier. His son, Beau, was only two years old at the time.

He shared with me how painful the breakup was and how deeply it affected him. What stood out most in my mind, though, was the way he talked about his son. Beau was clearly the most important thing in Jerry's life, and he was not ashamed to say so.

He went on to tell me that Beau had been born nearly 15 weeks prematurely, leaving him with some serious health challenges. In addition to being extremely small for his age, Beau was also living with HIV. He'd contracted the virus from a blood transfusion during a minor heart surgery he had as a baby.

There were no hard feelings when Jerry told me that any woman he became involved with would have to accept his son. It never occurred to me to not accept him—I loved children and, for whatever reason, Beau's HIV status was not an issue for me.

Shortly thereafter, I met his then six-year-old son. It was love at first sight! He was extremely small for his age due to his prematurity. He had a shock of white-blonde hair, a crossed eye hidden behind coke-bottle glasses, and an impish grin that stole my heart. There was an instant

connection between us, though neither of us knew at the time how profoundly deep it would later become, and why.

Fast forward two years. The child of my heart was now eight years old—an amazing feat considering all of his health challenges—and he very proudly walked me down the aisle to marry his dad.

Eighteen months later, we were ready to add to our happy family. My husband and I decided to get HIV tests, for no reason other than to be responsible. Nothing prepared us for the devastating results that came eight days later. Not only did I test HIV positive, I had an AIDS diagnosis with only 93 T-cells.

My doctor explained that the virus had been attacking my immune system for roughly 10 years without my knowledge, which led me to conclude that I contracted the virus in 1981, when I was engaged to someone else.

Meeting my husband when I did was most certainly divine timing. I will be eternally grateful for being misdiagnosed all those years ago. It was a gift. The universe had something else in mind for me.

I am fairly certain that, had I been properly diagnosed with HIV all those years ago, I probably would not have married my husband (his plate was already filled to overflowing with caring for his son), nor would I have had the honor of being a stepmother to one of the most amazing human beings I have ever had the privilege of knowing. As crazy as it might sound, getting my diagnosis was a blessing.

When we told Beau later that year that he had HIV (up until that time, he thought all of the pills he took were special vitamins to help him grow and make him stronger), I was able to tell him that I was living with HIV, too, and that we would get through this experience together. Beau took great comfort in knowing that his “Pammy” had the same thing that he did, and that he was not alone.

We held tight to the principles we believed to be true—that our thoughts and words had the power to help create health in our physical bodies. We played related audio tapes for Beau nightly and taught him the concept of visualization. Frankly, he was better at it than me.

I had my own mantra of affirmations that I said out loud daily. Jerry and I used prayer to strengthen our belief and give us hope. Beau and I continued to take our medications together daily.

I’d be lying if I said that the next 14 years were easy. There were some scary, painful and difficult times, including Beau’s 16-month battle with lymphoma, beginning when he was 14.

His spirit prevailed, though, and our bond grew stronger with each passing year. Every birthday was truly a celebration of life for both of us. Our deep love for one another as a family—and the belief that God had a special reason for us to meet—sustained the three of us through challenges

that would have caused other families to crumble.

Jerry and I never lost hope, even when Beau was hospitalized in March 2006 for what turned out to be an AIDS-related pneumonia. Subsequently, he had a splenectomy, followed by a biopsy of a suspicious lymph node. Beau received another cancer diagnosis and returned to the hospital for 60 days of debilitating chemotherapy.

What followed was another painful three months of transfusions, treatments and injections that ravaged his poor body and left him a shell of the young man we knew as “Just Beau.”

When we brought him home on September 25 of that year, he’d been in the hospital for six months. Our parental brains would not allow us to entertain any thoughts other than our sweet boy would make a complete recovery.

Unfortunately, God was running low on special angels and the child of my heart was taken from me. Beau died in his grandmother’s arms, with his loving Dad and I beside him, the morning after Thanksgiving—less than 60 days after bringing him home.

In his final days and weeks, his pain and suffering were so great, it would have been selfish to want him to continue to fight. We loved him too much for that—and knew that the spirit that was Beau would live on.

Today, I honor Beau’s memory, and the great gift that he was in my life, by taking care of my health and fighting to stay on this planet. Some of the challenges that face a person living with AIDS are more difficult than others, but I consider myself to be one of the lucky ones, so I meet those challenges as they come.

Pamela De Walt-Yelsky of Long Beach, California, is an HIV/AIDS advocate and a speaker, as well as an aspiring writer.

For responses about the positive impacts of living with HIV, click here. For responses about the negative impacts of living with the virus, click here.

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