Finding Hope

In a post titled “Losing Hope,” POZ blogger Aundaray Guess reflects on how the unconditional love his two dogs, Hope and Parker, gave him during their lives helped him live with HIV. Here is an edited excerpt.

April 4, 2016 By Aundaray Guess

I recently experienced two deaths within a week—the passing of my dogs, Hope and Parker. I’d had them since they were puppies. People may question what losing a pet has to do with HIV or question writing about the death of a dog. Hopefully, this post will bring a greater understanding of their connections.

Hope came first. As a beagle puppy, she was spunky and stubborn. Parker came the following year from the same breeder. She was more timid, the total opposite of Hope. It took her a while to find her bark, but when she did, she loved to howl. Hope couldn’t care less about being held, whereas Parker demanded the human touch.

I was already living with HIV when I got them. They made a difference. Before they came into my life, I was more reckless and sometimes had little regard for my own health. I would miss taking my medication, knowing the risk of developing resistance. Of course, other factors were promoting my bad health behaviors, but I didn’t care. After all, it was me against the world.

Something happened when Hope and Parker came into my life. My actions now affected other beings. What I didn’t realize was how much I needed them as well. They gave me a reason to go home. I don’t think there has been a single day when I opened the door to grumpy faces. There was always love waiting on the other side.

Sometimes when you live with HIV you forget how to love yourself, as you may feel unlovable and unwanted. It’s that unconditional love—whether it’s coming from another person or a pet—that makes you aware of your value. Even when you’re sad, pets are aware and want to bring signs of love back in your life.

Hope was good at this. As someone who didn’t like to be held, she would know when I was down. During those moments she would jump on the couch next to me and lean her full body weight against me with her paws resting on my legs. She just wanted to be close and let me know she was there. Parker was no slouch either. She would always put her head against my chest, as if to listen to my heart.

Don’t underestimate the difference pets can make in people’s lives. Sometimes those with HIV may not have the support of friends and family. Stigma may make finding a life partner difficult. So a pet may be that emotional force that keeps a person going during those dark times. A pet doesn’t care what your HIV status is. They just want to love you. And they give you a reason to love.

Hope was 15 and had heart failure. Parker was 14 and had cancer. Even when they were diagnosed, I had hope. It was the same hope I gave myself when I received my HIV diagnosis. Hope died at home in our arms. Less than a week later, Parker had developed pneumonia in her lungs and couldn’t breathe. I was informed she would suffocate during the night, so we decided to put her to sleep.

As I was grieving their loss, I returned to the bad habits that I had before Hope and Parker came into my life. But I have once again started to take care of myself. I couldn’t throw away all the lessons Hope and Parker taught me during the past 15 years. If I truly wanted to honor them, I had to reflect on the love they gave me.

Thank you, Hope and Parker, for reminding me of the love that exists and for helping me be a better person. You were two bright lights during the darkest moments of my life, and the greatest joy I can capture from your passing is that you’re together. I didn’t lose Hope or Parker; instead I gained so much love. Good night, girls.

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