Heads of the Class

Two students—one HIV negative and in high school, the other HIV positive and in college—dish about school, friends and life as teen AIDS activists.

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Jade: I was just looking at your pictures on MySpace and thinking, “Wow, this girl may be HIV positive, but she is so healthy. She looks healthier than me!”

Grissel: Thanks! How are you?

Jade: Good, thanks. I’ll start by saying that I’m 17 and in the 12th grade. I don’t have HIV. I live with my mother, who has had it for 14 years. I found out what it was when I was 6, when Mom and I had the sit-down “talk.” I really wasn’t interested in it; I just knew that she could die from it, so that was my main concern. I was in the seventh grade when I really started learning more about it, because I lived in a small town where everybody knew your business. Everybody knew my mom had HIV, so kids kind of picked on me. I’ve gotten in trouble at school for having arguments about it.

Grissel: I lived in Mexico City until I was 5, when my dad passed away. Then my mom, my sister and I came to California. I got tested for HIV when we moved, and my mom told me right off the bat—in a way that a 5-year-old would understand—that I was HIV positive. I think I was in seventh grade the first time I disclosed my status at school. This girl was talking about how she was going to have sex with her boyfriend, and I was, like, “Do you use a condom?” She said no, and I’m, like, “Well, what if you get an STI?” She said she hadn’t seen any bumps or rashes on him. And I’m, like, “When you have HIV you can’t tell—actually I have HIV and you don’t see any bumps on me, right?”

Jade: I’ve had friends come over to the house and they see medicine bottles and wonder who’s sick. Before, I’d say they were just some old pills or something like that. Now it doesn’t bother me. How is it for you, Grissel, living with HIV? You’re older than me, you probably have more friends...what’s it like on an everyday level? Is it hard to tell people that you have HIV, or find a boyfriend or things like that?

Grissel: I haven’t dated much, but the guys I have dated didn’t really mind. I think the fact that my mom has been straight up with me since I was 5 has made it easier on me because I knew why I was going to the doctor; I knew why I was getting my blood drawn, and I knew why I had to take

medications. I think it can be really shocking to find out that you're HIV positive once you're older. A lot of people with HIV get depressed. That's why I try to educate people that it's not the end of the world.

Jade: I try to educate people too, but usually people my age or younger, or maybe just a little bit older than me. I don't really try to tell older people about HIV because they might be, like, "Why is this child telling me this?" People are just surprised at what I can tell them about HIV. When they ask me why I know what I do, I say it's because my mom has AIDS. Even though I don't have it, it's still a part of me because I've lived with my mother, and I know everything that she's been through.

Grissel: Ever since I was little I've felt like I have to correct people if they're giving out wrong information—maybe because it's like they're talking about me when they say things—but it's also because I'm telling them things that can help them.

Jade: I don't want people to judge me, my mom or you for having any part of this disease. I can't tell anyone what to think, but whether you have HIV or if you're living with someone who has it, don't be scared of it. Just help more. Get educated and help more—by educating others about what you know.

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