Healthy Debate

Shawn Decker visits a town hall on health care reform.

November 1, 2009 By Shawn Decker

Growing up I spent more time in the hospital than any of my friends. I was born with hemophilia, so a bike wreck had the potential to be much more dramatic than a mere scrape on the elbow. By age 11, I realized a life of endangering myself physically wasn't worth the risk. But just as I decided to stay clear of the ER, I was diagnosed with HIV, which made sure that there would be more hospital visits in my future.

As a kid, I took health care for granted. Today, I understand how having access to health insurance has helped me reach my mid-30s. My private insurance isn't the best, and it's expensive. I quickly reach the yearly cap paying for my HIV meds, but I get by thanks to a state program that helps relieve the burden of my $1,200 monthly premium. It's a whopper because I'm a "WPC"—a Walking Preexisting Condition. I was a preexisting condition with hemophilia before I could walk.

To try to understand why decent and affordable health insurance for more people was something to debate in the first place, I went to a town hall meeting several miles outside the safe confines of my liberal community in Charlottesville, Virginia. This trip came to be known as "The Ruckus in Ruckersville" (OK, maybe that's overstating it a bit).

At the Ruckersville Elementary School, Representative Tom Perriello (D–Va.) answered questions in a room that was usually reserved for renditions of *Snow White*. Throughout the hourlong discussion, there were quite a few rumblings and micro-shoutdowns. The intellectual lowlight came when Perriello discussed the importance of access to prenatal care to save the six-figure expense of premature births. Someone interrupted him by yelling, "Abortion!"

The booing, cheering and sign-waving at that town hall reminded me of the live pro wrestling events I am so fond of. A little of the magic in Ruckersville was stripped away when I noticed two groups of people—for and against health insurance reform—handing out pre-made signs. Lame. One sad sack had gone to the trouble of making his own sign: "ObamaCare = Death Sentence for Grandma!" Even though I didn't agree with him, I applauded the fact that at least the guy had some ink on his hands for his troubles.

It seemed that most of the people there had already made up their minds before they walked through the door. Those against health care reform were motivated by either a dislike of the

president or by the false fear of losing what they currently have. Those in support of reform were driven by the dire reality of what they don't have or cannot currently obtain. It was literally a debate between the haves and have nots. I'm no expert on health care, but I know that a thousand hard-luck stories cannot convince one greedy, paranoid person to give two shits about someone in need.

I am here today because I was born into a middle-class family and I got to see a doctor when I needed to, got treatments when they were required and have access to the HIV medications that help keep my virus in check. Decent health care for every American is the moral issue of the day. I'd like to think that I'd feel that way even if I weren't viewing the world through the tinted, empathetic eyes of a Walking Preexisting Condition.

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