Paul Williams

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Wichita, Kansas
Positive since 2009

I found out I was positive when I tried to join the Army. When I received a medical disqualification letter, I knew why. I remember saying, “No one asked me if I wanted this,” as I left the doctor’s office the next day when they confirmed my suspicions. They told me I would have to get used to blood draws. I hate needles.

The only reference I had to HIV was the movie Philadelphia, where Tom Hanks dies a horrible death. I was scared of anything that might make me sick or that had germs on it. I thought I would be dead within a couple months.

I happened to visit a food bank later that week. The counselor there seemed cool, so I told him I had just found out I was positive, since I was still freaking out. He sat back in shock. He asked how I could be so calm and said he didn’t know how he would live with such news. I thought, “Wow, what a sucky counselor.”

I also went to a support group. Everyone there was old. They told me to calm down. They told me if I just lived healthy and took meds as prescribed, I would die of normal causes. This gave me hope, although I was still freaking out.

At about the same time, I lost my apartment and had to move in with family who lived in a much smaller city. I was leaving my friends and everyone I knew—everyone who had been supporting me. I became depressed and I drank. This caused my CD4s to drop and I had to go on medication. The idea of having to be on medication for the rest of my life scared me since I wasn’t born wealthy. But God has been good and insurance has covered what I need.

As months and then years passed, I realized I would be OK. I have been through a couple jobs and was nearly homeless at one point. But life has gone on. I found and confronted the person who infected me. He knew but didn’t tell me. I was stupid and naive. If there hadn’t been miles between us at the time we finally talked, it would have gotten violent. I was angry with him for a while. But with time and with growing maturity, I moved on.

My paranoia five years ago seems stupid now. I am not afraid to get dirty and I know I won't break. I have been undetectable for several years. My status only comes up when I go to the doctor every four months to do labs. I have even learned how to chill during what I used to call my "vampire sessions."

I take my meds every morning along with the multivitamin I have always taken. I also take a cholesterol pill at bedtime, since higher cholesterol is one of the side effects of my meds. I worry about looking older and wish I weren't single and that my friends lived closer. Despite having the "plague," though, my medical status doesn't define me and it is rarely a thought. I just try to live healthy like anyone at the ancient age of 39 should. Unless you're my pharmacist or doctor, you would have no clue that I am HIV positive.

Which takes me to a second point that is probably moot, considering this is a positive-oriented website: Always play safe. You have no clue what someone's status is. The adage that you have slept with everyone your partner has slept with still holds true. Now being positive isn't the immediate death sentence it once was. But I will never be able to join the military. Guys freak out.

Laws in many states consider HIV-positive people to be walking plagues, and people can be put in prison for years for exposing someone. Ignorance, even in the medical community, is rampant. The few times I have had to go to my local small-town emergency room, everyone has freaked out as soon as my status is announced. HIV will make me age faster. The medication is hard on my body and raises my cholesterol.

One drunk night…and one dumb and naive decision.

What three adjectives best describe you?
Honest, thoughtful and funny

What is your greatest achievement?
Graduating from college

What is your greatest regret?
Letting fear control me

What keeps you up at night?
Being single

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?
The stigma

What is the best advice you ever received?
Life happens

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?

Greg Louganis

What drives you to do what you do?
Outrage at injustice, discrimination and elitism

What is your motto?
Don’t stop.

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?
My medication. Everything else is easily replaceable.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?
A squirrel. Because I am furry and cute. But also because I will fight to protect my turf and family.

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