The Stand

May 1, 2008 By Sharon Maxwell

Do you remember when you were 3? I do. The year was 1950, and I had just caught a virus called polio. I couldn't walk, and my family was quarantined in our home. My mother said everyone feared this new virus: No one wanted their children to play with someone who had polio, swim in the same pool, or use the same glasses, silverware or bathroom facilities. I began my lifelong journey of wearing a leg brace.

As I grew up, I had to decide: Would I become a victim or become independent? I chose the latter. I became a graphic designer, photographer and artist. I became a stronger woman, and everyone eventually accepted my polio because it was part of me, Sharon.

Then, in 1994, I contracted another virus: HIV. My first thought was "Not again!" Here comes the familiar stigma, fear and anxiety about telling anyone I was living with disease. Fear that people would not look past the diagnosis to see the real person inside—a fully independent, funny, honest, bohemian woman.

Why have we learned to accept polio but not HIV? They are both viruses—sure, different types, but why should that matter? I'm still the same little girl wearing that brace and swinging from the monkey bars. I've just grown up to be a woman who wants the world to recognize me for who I am—a woman first, then a person wearing a brace and, finally, someone living with AIDS. Having one disability has helped me to deal with another. Polio gave me my freedom, and I will not give it up to AIDS.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/polio-HIV-14364-2327