Postcard From the Edge

Creighton Bailey flies to San Fran for an online hookup—with his HIV support group.

July 1, 2008 By Creighton Bailey

It's September 13, 2007, and I'm pacing around San Francisco International Airport. I can't find Curtis! He's a friend from work—back home in Austin—and for years he was the only other HIV-positive person I knew, the only one I could talk to. That was before I discovered the online Forums at AIDSmeds.com. I've introduced Curtis to them too, and we gossip and debate online with other HIV-positive people from around the world: men, women, old people, young people, those fluent in English and some not. We talk about relationships, meds, side effects, fantasies, pets and peeves. Over time, the group has become very close. And every once in a while, we travel from across the globe to meet each other in person. That's why Curtis and I had come to San Fran. This would be my second AIDSmeds Forums gathering and Curtis's first. If only I could find him.

I wonder if he has chickened out. After all, I've had a hard time convincing Forums newbies that Internet friends can be just as wonderful in person. Before I met my fellow Forums members face-to-face, I wondered if they'd be as nice and understanding to me there as they were online. Would I really feel like I belonged, as I did in cyberspace? I feared that a negative experience at a gathering would sever the only lifeline I had to other people living with the virus. Perhaps Curtis feared that too.

After a lengthy search and several unreturned phone calls, I head for my hotel…and as I'm walking, I find him. Turns out his flight was delayed and he'd forgotten his phone. He tells me straight off that he won't be spending much time with the group. But when we walk into the hotel and the Forums members mob us with hugs and kisses, I know he's hooked.

The next morning, 50 of us taxi to Golden Gate Park. Jan, an HIV-positive great-grandmother from New Zealand, has organized a remembrance ceremony in the National AIDS Memorial Grove. Verses are read, a wreath is laid and there's a prayer written by Alan, from Alabama. We each lay a flower on the wreath.

On Saturday, Mike, from Ohio, rents an SUV, and we cross the Golden Gate Bridge to see the redwoods. I've never seen one before. Someone says that even the smallest of the trees are 50 years old, and I recall that when I told my best friend that I had tested HIV positive, I said that I'd be lucky to make it to 50 (I'm now 41). I hadn't known at the time how effective medicines could be, or how other peoples' support would bolster my health. I learned all that in the Forums.

On Monday night, about a dozen of us are talking and laughing, but there's dread in the back of my mind. It's my fifth night with my friends, but I need another five. After dinner I see Jan in the hotel hallway, and she hugs me. "You take care of yourself," she says in her Kiwi lilt. She's supported me through some of my toughest times—when my grandmother died, when my cat died and, most recently, when a relationship ended.

She hugs me again outside the hotel Tuesday morning, when Curtis and I leave for home. I walk slowly to the subway entrance. I stop at the top of the stairs, set my bags down and tear up. I've fallen in love with my friends all over again.

At least I'll be able to see many of them when we reunite this August in Mexico City, after the International AIDS Conference. HIV, and all its baggage, will be coming with us. If only that could be lost at the airport. But at least we'll have each other to help carry the load.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/postcard-from-the-edge-14804-6907