Pretty Amazing

July 8, 2013 By Kareema Charles

Paige Rawl

Paige Rawl has been HIV positive since birth. When she confided to her best friend in sixth grade about living with the virus, she went from being one of the most popular kids in her school to having no friends, all within a matter of two weeks. She was bullied to the point of having to finish eighth grade being homeschooled.

Rawl made the best of her situation. She became the youngest certified HIV/AIDS educator through the American Red Cross and then began educating teens and adults around the country by sharing her story. She was even spotlighted by POZ in 2011 for her efforts.

She still travels nationwide talking to Americans everywhere about her story. But she is also preparing for her freshman year of college—and for her chance to be on the upcoming October cover of Seventeen.

Rawl is one of the finalists in the magazine's 2013 Pretty Amazing Contest. Seventeen is giving one of the finalists a chance to tell her story in the magazine and win a $10,000 scholarship. We asked Rawl about the contest and her goals for the future.

How have things changed in your life now that you're going to college?

I am a lot clearer about where I want to go in the future. I definitely know that speaking and educating is a key part of my life. I am experiencing life in my own way now and becoming more independent.

Why did you decide to enter the Seventeen contest?

I heard about it from a friend and then read about it. I thought I would be a good fit because I decided to take a hard situation and turn it into something good. I was encouraged by other kids and teens I mentor.

I did this for them because they keep me going and I know that me speaking out about this will educate people, rid the stigma and encourage the kids I mentor to speak out about the virus.

What would you do with the scholarship money?

I am definitely going to use this money for college and to go out there and travel and speak some more. Because I want to work in a lab in the future, I have to go to school for at least six to eight years, so this will definitely help me.

Are you ready for the potential media attention?

My story has been around in and out of the media since I was in the eighth grade. I had all through high school to get used to my story being out there in different places, so this is something I have learned to build up to.

I have actually gotten a lot of support from my friends, the people in my town and the HIV community. I think that having that support behind me has really helped me through this process.

What's the response been so far to your being a finalist?

I've gotten messages from people in the U.K., Italy, Australia, and even a message in Spanish. All have been encouraging. This is definitely helping me get my story out there.

I am also getting messages from kids in middle school, just saying they are proud of what I'm doing. I hope this shows that I can do things just as much as a normal person. I hope it shows people that you don't have to be afraid of someone with HIV.

What are your plans for the next few years?

I will be majoring in molecular biology at Ball State University [in Indiana]. I want to become an HIV/AIDS medicine researcher.

I'm really excited to start college and will be doing an academic early start, so I will be moving into my dorm on my birthday and meeting my teachers before classes start.

I also have a memoir that I am working on. I have been working on it since April 2012—it's been a very long process.

To read the 2011 POZ magazine profile on Rawl and other HIV-positive young people, click here.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/pretty-amazing-contest2013-24206-2269