Rory Ford

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Orillia, Ontario
Positive since 2012

I grew up bullied by everyone. Other than a learning disability and attention deficit disorder, I was a very healthy boy. One year, my bullying came to a climax when one of three tormentors kicked me in the back during a high school assembly, leaving me with a severely damaged core of back muscles. What I gained from that experience was a profound sense of the delicateness of human life.

I went on to become an activist in the field of health and the environment. One of my favorite activities was to enjoy "healthy raving". Many people think of "raves" as a place where people get really messed up on drugs and dance to crazy beats spun by deejays, which is only partially true. My guess is that only one half to two thirds of those who attended these parties took some form of drug to enhance their experience.

I looked at raves from a spiritual perspective: the beats were a meditative experience. The only drugs I took were pure or natural. I spent many years manning the "chill domes", health booths and T.R.I.P. (Toronto Raver Information Project) tents— places where people could get help for their overdosed minds and sore-from-dancing bodies as well as receive sexual health info since not much of it is taught in high school.

I practiced harm reduction in every aspect in my life. I wasn't really sexually active. But I knew the dangers of sex and drugs and definitely practiced what I preached.

Flash forward and I am now an HIV-positive 32-year old. How did this happen after such a positive and healthy life?

Prior to my diagnosis, I had ended a nine-year relationship. I wanted a life on a farm, the ability to live sustainably and as healthy as possible and he was going in a different direction.

A year after the breakup, I was still sex free. I had enjoyed plenty of safe sex during my relationship, and was getting frustrated at the lack of getting laid. This was a time of great stress for me. A "friend" of mine decided it was time to take me to a men's bathhouse.

"Surely, I will finally get some action," I thought, and I sure did. Being in a completely new situation, I was at my friend's mercy and followed him around from room to room, nervous as hell. In one room, a man with curly hair waved us in and closed the door. It had been a long time since I was offered drugs but I was so nervous and out of my safety zone that I partook in the aforementioned chemical bliss. Soon I gave my body to another man who had joined us in the room.

My friend had promised to take care of me, and to make sure people used protection while having intercourse. The whole time I was having sex, I handed my partner condom after condom, thinking they had either ripped or he was taking them off after a malfunction of some sort. To this day I haven't a clue as to what actually transpired, since my friend told me, "it's fine, don't worry!"

I left the ordeal happy to have had a sexual encounter, but deep down I felt unsafe and abused.

Two weeks later I began to feel quite ill. My muscles ached and I had terrible night sweats. I did some research on STIs, and found my symptoms to be inline with an HIV infection, and got a blood test.

Sure enough, two weeks later I got the call: "Hi Rory, is this a good time to talk? Yes? Can you find a quiet place to sit down?" I heard the words I never wanted to hear even though I wasn't surprised to hear them. I had already prepared myself for the worst. I immediately told my parents. That was the hardest part. Next came my friends, who were also crushed by my news, though they were very supportive. I felt numb for weeks after. How could someone who practiced harm reduction and safe sex all my life, receive such horrible news? How could this happen to me of all people?

The answer was self-evident: it only takes one time, one fuck up. I am now under the care of a fantastic doctor, and have started treatment. My symptoms have cleared up and the sleepy state I was in is gone. I am happy again.

But alas, I am still burdened by this tragic infection. And all I want in the world is for this to never happen to anyone else ever again. Unfortunately, there seems to be a lull in information and activism these days. Most people I talked to in those initial days of my infection had no clue how HIV affects people, or even how people are infected. This needs to change, and that's why I write this story.

Live long, live healthy, practice what you preach, and preach what you practice—if you practice safe sex. If you don't, you may end up like me: an infectious, virus-laden young man who only wanted what everyone needs…safe sex.

What three adjectives best describe you?
Eco-geek, friendly, wise

What is your greatest achievement?

Learning as much as I know now, through trials and tribulations

What is your greatest regret?
Not making 100% sure that a condom was in place while having sex

What keeps you up at night?
Knowing that I could be doing what I really enjoy: having a farm to call my own

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?
I would change how easy it is to be infected

What is the best advice you ever received?
Live your life the way you want, but sustainably, so that other earthly inhabitants may do the same, in perpetuity.

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?
Any person working to better the lives of those with HIV/AIDS, including doctors, researchers, outreach workers and people who take precautions to not spread the virus.

What drives you to do what you do?
The knowledge that we can all live sustainably, and that the changes we can make are easily within our grasp.

What is your motto?
Live in the now, with your future always on your mind

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?
Besides loved ones, my photos and ticket stubs/wrist bands from events I have attended... But now that I think of it, I think my medications are more important!

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?
I would be not an animal, but a beneficial herb or tree, so that I may live as part of someone’s health and well-being

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