Do the White Thing

A strange case of hero worship

January 1, 1998 By Shawn Decker

Lying on my bed last night, scarfing cookies and channel-surfing, I saw Judith Light staring out at me from the TV screen. I knew it wasn't *Who's the Boss* because she didn't have the bleached-blonde mane; her hair was brunette and gnarly curled. Like my mom's hair. Only the mother of a hemo-positoid could look like this. I was tuned in to the middle of *The Ryan White Story.* I'd seen parts of this movie before I came out of my viral closet. But now it got me thinking…

There was a time when I avoided anything at all about Ryan White. I even switched off the television when he appeared, age 12, to testify before Congress, share Pop Tarts with Michael Jackson or advise Barbara Walters on how to treat a hemorrhage. I knew he was doing incredible things, but had no desire to hear him speak, let alone meet him. Everyone was always saying that Ryan was, as I've heard many times about myself, "wise beyond his years." Being the world's most famous "innocent victim of AIDS" will do that to a kid.

Like Ryan, I was kicked out of school (sixth grade); unlike Ryan, I didn't ask questions. After all, I didn't even know I had HIV when I was dumped like a chump from the ranks of spit balling and armpit farts. My mom recalls finding me in the school office in tears, blubbering, "I didn't do anything." But until a couple of years ago, I'd forgotten every detail of this ordeal. It was all a blur. When Mom told me, I couldn't believe it! Like it had happened to someone else. I thought, "This sounds like Ryan's life…"

So flashback to the summer of '87: My mom asked me if I wanted "to do what Ryan's doing." I thought about it seriously, but all I could imagine was people asking questions like "Are you afraid of dying? Why don't you go ahead and die already?!" Though fantasies of fame and power piqued my curiosity, they just weren't enough. The substance wasn't there. I had nothing to teach people that Ryan wasn't already doing. So I decided to stay in school (otherwise everyone would assume I was on my deathbed) and let my twin brother by a different mother carry the hemo-positoid torch alone. Ryan did a great job, and to be honest, I was scared shitless of never getting a girlfriend. I wasn't too big on the idea of being a copycat, either.

My mom loved to keep up with Ryan's adventures, but I did my best to ignore him. His presence reminded me that I was sick. I didn't want to be sick – I wanted to be *cooooooooool.* To Mom, Ryan was a member of the family. With great pride, she explained to me importance of his accomplishments: Though Ryan telling his story, he saved a lot of hemo-positoid brothers from

ass-whuppings in their own little towns. He opened people's eyes and stripped them of some fears.

So in 1990 my mom was pretty upset when her adopted other hemo-positoid son passed to spirit. Even without her saying so, I could sense that some of her hope was buried when Ryan was laid to rest. I felt the same way… only I'd spent my whole infected existence building a barrier between myself and Ryan. It's strange, but I feared becoming too attached to him because he had AIDS. How's that for irony? To me, my HIV was like *my* little snowflake and unlike anyone else's snowflake. I guess I was afraid that if I mashed my little flake into the collective Snowman of AIDS, I would melt with the rest of them.

Seven years passed. Jeanne White became an amazing activist and wrote a book about her life. My mom and I finally met her – she was speaking at a nearby Virginia college, and afterward we invited her out for a late dinner. There was a surreal quality to the evening, even though it felt totally natural. For mom, it was her chance to meet an idol. She gave Jeanne updates on the hemo-settlement and shared secrets about how she raised me. By talking with Jeanne, I too, realized how far I've come in this maddening journey. She was very pleased when I told her I'm speaking in public and enjoying it. I knew I was at last in the right place. I've finally caught up to her son.

I never doubted Ryan's influence or integrity, but only now do I fully understand him. And when I pass to spirit, I'm going to find him, give him a big positoid hug and say thanks.

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