Two Pills Saved My Life. Two Shots Could Have Saved His.

April 1, 2015 By Kevin Cummines

I had a headache on September 19, 2012. It was annoying, an added hurdle to the grind of my week. I was annoyed at Kyle, my boyfriend, because he probably gave me the flu. That's what we thought he was battling. We avoided each other that week. He was sick, and I was music directing a show that weekend. An actor and playwright, Kyle also had his own shows in development. Neither of us had time to be sick.

When Kyle's symptoms became much more severe, I toyed with forcing him to go to the hospital. Something clearly wasn't right, but I decided to give it one more day. Kyle was stubborn, and I didn't have that fight in me.

Kyle died that night. I was potentially next.

We were sero-discordant. He broke my heart a few times because of it. He worried about hurting me, being unable to commit. He worried about giving me HIV. He worried about everything and said nothing. That's how he was. I never worried. I knew he was the man for me the first time I saw him. Four and a half years and many break-ups after we met, we were back together and stronger than ever. I asked him to marry me, and he said yes. I imagined an amazing life together: artistic, impoverished, kinky, frustrating, playful, rare times of quiet…for better or worse, I was ready. He was a giant bundle of awesome. He was indomitable. His personality was massive, his presence powerful. He was my love, my hero, the man to join me in raising my daughter, the man I would support until my dying day.

Kyle's viral load was undetectable. He was the healthiest person I knew. It never crossed my mind to police our aches and pains. I never imagined meningitis would steal my future from me. I never imagined meningitis would kill him.

The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene sprung into action after Kyle's autopsy. Within an hour I was treated for the bacteria that killed him. Two pills. Eight dollars. One dose. So cheap, my insurance wasn't even bothered. We treated my daughter as well, just to be safe. But as the weeks passed, the casualties rose from this particular strain of meningitis, which killed within three days of the onset of symptoms, far faster than normal, and untreatable for most once symptoms began.

The reports were conflicting all over the media. But I watched as man after man was lost from our community, as the disease spread beyond gay men, to the West Coast, through colleges, and beyond. I watched family after family live the pain I lived, the pain Kyle's friends, families, and business partner lived. I watched an easily-preventable, easily-cured tragedy unfold — easily preventable because a vaccine could wipe the danger away with two doses.

Kyle Spidle

The vaccine is inexpensive, often free. One shot if you're HIV-negative, two if you're positive. No side effects for most. Between fits of collapsing in tears as I continued to process Kyle's death, I told everyone I knew to get vaccinated. Yet, I waited nearly a year to be vaccinated, hoping something would take me…I wanted to be where Kyle was. That's all I ever wanted to begin with. I wanted to bask in his smile again. I wanted to stare back into those eyes, the color of grass with flecks of brass, more so in his right eye. I wanted the unrealistic desires of a grieving man. But I took the shot. I had no side effects. I felt no different after receiving the vaccine.

Well, that's a lie. I felt angry. Angry for not knowing the symptoms of meningitis. Angry for not better protecting my family and the man who was the center of it. Angry at the world, the country, social media, the government, the city, for not telling me the vaccine existed, for not requiring us to get it, for not showing me that a free shot with no side effects would save my life, my daughter's life, my future husband's life. I was angry that his business collapsed, that his business partner lost it all, that his life work would be left unrealized, that his parents were devastated, that his nephews would grow up without him. You name the injustice, I was angry about it. I was angry that two pills might have saved his life, and two shots in the arm could have prevented all of this.

This is your wake-up call. Get vaccinated. It's easy. It's cheap. It's likely free or low cost from most clinics and departments of health. It's the right thing to do to protect yourself and those you love. If you are a legislator, this is also your call. This is life or death for your constituents. My life was saved because New York City knew what to do. Call your representatives because we need public policy to address this, and we need it now. The vaccine is cheap and available. Two and a half years into this whole widower business, I'm ready to fight for my people. Nobody should have to suffer as we have.

Even today, I imagine a life with Kyle. I imagine working through his mood swings, his fears, his failures. I remember how infuriating he could be, how ridiculous his expectations could get, how closed he would become at the slightest sign of conflict. I imagine still feeling inadequate next to his devastating beauty, and learning to accept that he loved me even though I didn't deserve it. I imagine teaching him to express his fears to my face. I imagine us going through what every couple goes through heading towards the twilight of old age, a twilight we'll never realize. I imagine the man I loved so much beside me forever. I remember the best of times, his head on my chest as he slept, or the way he smiled at me when nobody was looking. I remember how his body felt in my arms. I still feel the true and honest love I always felt for him. Two pills saved my life. Two shots could have saved his.

From the April/May issue of SeroZero by GMHC. To read the issue as a PDF, click here.

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