Positively Page Turning

Author Courtney Sheinmel imprints her teen readers with messages of sexual safety—and acceptance of people living with HIV.

April 1, 2010 By LaToya Johnson

In *Positively*, young adult author Courtney Sheinmel eases HIV stigma among preteens and their parents with a fictional story about a 13-year-old girl learning how to cope with being HIV positive.

Why did you write Positively?
I've worked with the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation since I was 13—that was 19 years ago. For years, I imagined what it was like to grow up living with HIV, to lose people and to continue fighting. The story was stewing inside me for a long time, but it wasn't something I necessarily wanted to write because I'm HIV negative and I felt like I didn't have the right to put that story down. But my agent convinced me to write it. So I did. A friend of mine, who's HIV positive, also lent support.

Why was it important for you to write a story about a 13-year-old girl living with HIV?
I generally write for that age group. It's a voice that comes naturally to me. It's easier for me to get in the head of someone who is 12 or 13 than someone who is my age. I remember so many of the books I read in middle school. I read them and internalized them and can recite parts of them back to you. There's a power that comes with children's literature.

What do you hope people learn from reading your book?
I don't [normally] set out to teach a lesson. [But] I wanted to show kids it was OK to be friends with someone living with HIV. And hopefully, when my 12-year-old readers are older and making their own decisions [about sex], they'll be smarter about protecting themselves.

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