Back in the AIDS Closet With Me?

September 26, 2011 By Shawn Decker

For the last decade-plus, Gwenn and I have educated together as a couple dealing with HIV and, as far as I know, we're the only hetero couple doing this on a national level. Which seems absolutely crazy anytime I stop and think about it.

Speaking about HIV in a way that gets people to listen is what I do best. I haven't had many jobs in my life, a fact of which I was reminded when a friend recently mentioned the softness of my hand after a firm shake. In many ways, despite the many medical obstacles I've navigated since birth (hemophilia, hepatitis B, HIV, Pac-Man Fever), I've had it pretty easy. I've always been loved, I come from a middle class family- all the major bases have been covered. Once I got comfortable with sharing my status at age 20, life got a lot easier because my biggest roadblock had been plowed over.

I have a way of compartmentalizing the seriousness of my own experiences with HIV, mainly because I don't like to dwell on the rough spots. Also, I understand that as an educator, a moderate focus on my own history is important, but the main goal is making an audience realize why sexual health is important to them. I'm just the vessel of information. I've lived through the discrimination, uncertainty and health concerns that an HIV diagnosis can bring. And Gwenn is a vital partner in the educational message, because she has the HIV negative point of view and is proof to the success one can have when they are knowledgeable about condom use and its ability to prevent HIV infection.

I'm so proud of the work we've done. But I must admit that times are slow these days. I spend a lot of time in my hometown, when I should be out there educating, while I'm still young enough to want to travel and put myself on display. Admittedly, I'm beginning to wonder if a return to the AIDS closet is in my cards, and that my educational contribution is solely meant to be this blog, or the random passing along of *My Pet Virus*.

I think sexual health should be mandatory in junior high schools. Of course, this is coming from someone who was HIV positive in junior high school. The disconnect of peoples' sexual activity and how we approach education is something I'll never quite get. I've spoken at hundreds of colleges, but never once at a junior high school and only seldom at high schools. Each time Gwenn and I have spoken at the latter, the response has been fantastic.

And that only makes it harder. Aside from a bum ankle due to hemophilia and slight cartilage damage which may have been exacerbated by years of kicking AIDS' ass, I'm good to go. I've got t-cells and the continued desire to educate another generation of youth. No one else is going to step up and fill the void if I just disappear into the empty glass of a consumed iced mocha.

The only question is whether or not there’s an interest in what I have to offer.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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