A Bloody Good Time on #WorldHemophiliaDay

April 17, 2021 By Shawn Decker

This World Hemophilia Day I thought it would be fun to share some whimsical blood-lettings of days past... having four-and-a-half decades of life with hemophilia under my belt, I've certainly seen my fair share of my own plasma.

So without further ado, here's a couple of my most epic bleeds.

A Bite on the Leg and A Punch To The Face

Age: 13

Two years after my diagnosis and entering 8th grade, I was in a better place with the new reality of HIV. Rumors swirling at school had simmered down, I'd made a ton of friends the second half of 7th grade and had enjoyed a nice Summer hanging out with my best friends. A few weeks or so into the new school year, I managed to snag my first post-diagnosis girlfriend, Kelly.

She was a year my junior, but it was certainly her that initiated the first real kiss of my life. Before that a peck on the lips in the 6th Grade was as far as I'd gotten. What felt like a homerun at the time seemed like a distant bunt, especially with such a life-altering development in regard to testing positive for HIV.

One weekend Kelly invited me to go to her grandparent's farm with her and her mother. As we passed a barn, I noticed pale blue eyes locking on me: it was a dog that looked more like a wolf, especially since it appeared to be eating some bloody raw meat. It must have sensed that I would be a particularly juicy meal, because the dog lept up and began to charge towards me... I ran, and the huge chain jerked Cujo back. Catching my breath and safely out of the dog's reach, I noticed blood pooling at the top of my sock. It was late September in Virginia and I was wearing shorts... a stream of blood was running down my leg, and when I inspected the source of the wound behind my knee I knew I was in a pickle.

Fortunately, the two centimeter wound wasn't worse, but it was gnarly and wouldn't stop bleeding. Kelly's mom bandaged me up and called my dad, who disclosed my medical resume to her, so she'd be safe around my blood. It was 1988, so safe was better than sorry where transmission was concerned. I got patched up, and was relieved that Kelly and her family greeted the news of my HIV status with warmth and compassion.

But that wasn't the only bloodshed in our epic 6-week relationship, an eternity by junior high school standards!

One day Kelly was upset. Her former 6th grade boyfriend was a real jerkwad, and apparently he'd "gotten fresh" with her in class. So I decided I'd issue some justice in between classes, on the little covered path outside that connected the two buildings that contained all of that impressionable learnin'. Well, I was fixin' to bring my haymakers out of retirement for one more go- I hadn't thrown a punch since before my diagnosis, when I walloped a friend at a slumber party who made the mistake of pissing me off.

See, as a kid with hemophilia, when you got in a situation where you had to fight it out you had two simple choices: run or strike first.

I confronted the culprit and told him what I thought of his antics. He saw that I was serious, and suggested we go off premises to settle the score. I opted to stay put as classmates walked past us, unaware of the situation that was about to take place. Pushing him, I said, "Let's go right here!" His battle readiness apparently wasn't as rusty as mine, and he grabbed me in a headlock and just wailed punches under my face with his free hand. We fell to the ground and luckily, one of my childhood friends tackled us both, shielding me from more blows.

My nose, the Achille's heel of my life with hemophilia, had been busted open. My face resembled that of my hero, Ric Flair, the professional wrestler known for defending his title by any means but coming out of combat wearing a crimson mask. He always had back-up, and that day I did to. I must have sensed that I may be overmatched, because I'd alerted my friend earlier that morning that something might be going down that afternoon.

After the defeat, I retired from combat, humbled by the defeat. A few days later, I was at Kelly's house after school and there was a knock on the door: it was the culprit. Kelly freaked out, afraid that he was there to finish the physical alternation that I had started at school. "He wants to see you- please don't go!" Figuring diplomacy might be order, I told her I'd be okay, and met my rival outside.

"Hey…."

"… hey."

I asked what was up, and he apologized. I'll never forget his words: "I'm sorry… I… I didn't know." Now, I'll never know if he meant that he didn't know that I had hemophilia or that he was referring to HIV. My sense at the time was that it was the latter.

I can't imagine his panic that day. Surely he and his family were informed about my HIV status, since he'd been exposed to my blood, which was splattered about all over his knuckles, forearms and shirt that day. Shit, maybe I didn't lose that fight after all, he must have thought his life was over.

Anyway, I thanked him for the sentiment and he went on his way. Kelly rushed to me and I said everything was cool. Because it was. And there was never another problem with the guy.

Kelly and I eventually broke up at my behest. I wasn't comfortable with her knowing something about me that I so desperately wanted to forget. She was actually cool with me having HIV- imagine finding that out as a 12-year old in 1988? That your boyfriend had a life-threatening, scary virus. My god.

My expulsion from 6th grade after testing positive gets a lot of play, but I have also been the recipient of grace that has gone above and beyond.

Several years ago, I was invited to speak at a high school a couple of miles away from where I grew up. Occasionally during question and answer, that dog bite comes up. I share that story just to show that it wasn't all doom and gloom when it came to how people reacted to my HIV status...

Later that night, I got a message on Facebook from Kelly. She said her son came home from school, talking about this interesting character that came to his class to discuss life with HIV and sexual health. He continued to explain some of the details that stuck with him. Kelly informed him that she was the girl in the dog biting incident. I laughed out loud as I read the message, yelling to Gwenn,

"Oh. My. God. You gotta hear this!"

It's such a small world at times, isn't it?

Positively Yours,
Shawn

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.