Here’s One Way to Raise $5,000 in a Week

An email launches a life-changing and flesh-baring experience.

April 2, 2020 By JMV

The air is calm in my bedroom on this early spring night in late March. Etta James is playing on a jazz playlist from my iPhone, inspiring me to write after a long day of relaxation and meetings, meetings and relaxation. This is a tough time for the world as many are forced to stay at home due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Things are scary on the outside, so I’m making a decision to have a productive 2020 no matter what. I feel the need to continue typing and telling my story, not just for you, but also for me—for everyone collectively.

It’s that time of year when things are supposed to be picking up for everyone. We feel the need to be outside and planning our summers, but right now everything is at a standstill. So I’d rather talk about a time in 2017 when I was so busy and there were miracles happening around me left and right. How does that sound?

Let me set the scene: It’s May and the city is heating up, and people are wearing less clothing—you can feel men looking you up in and down in your shorts and a tank top or tee. Everyone is starting to fill their schedules with pre-summer plans and outdoor brunches, but not me—I was preparing for Broadway Bares, the famous charity burlesque show with 250 performers, makeup artists and hair stylists, and stage crews all coming together to fight HIV and AIDS.

I went to the meeting for Bares, my first one in years, the one where they tell us what the theme of the show will be—think about it as a type of introductory meeting. We hand in headshots and resumés, then meet our Bares family, veterans and newbies, and that’s when the excitement starts. Things were on track, but just because I submitted everything didn’t mean anything. Spots on the stage weren’t guaranteed. There’s not a proper audition process with dance combinations and such, just applications and resumés. What if I didn’t make it back on that stage? Well, I told myself it didn’t matter. After all, I could still help raise money for someone in need by promoting the show and accepting online donations. And if I wasn’t chosen for the show, there were still plenty of other volunteer positions like go-go dancing and selling t-shirts. I had no idea what was in store for me.

When I say that fundraising is the main focus of the show, I mean it. They tell us where the money goes and what $25 can really do, like feeding twenty people a fresh meal. (if you want a better look at the behind-the-scenes of the show, check out this feature story in POZ, "The Show Must Go One.") I decided to raise awareness and funds by using my social media presence. So I wrote multiple posts daily detailing my experiences living with HIV—many of which became ideas for this blog—and as I opened up about my life, I asked people to donate even one dollar because it still helps to save lives.

A few donations would pour in, and I'd get excited. As an important part of the Broadway Bares show, we performers also had a "Stripathon" fundraiser, which is an online fundraising page personalized per participant. We tell our stories, like why we do the show and/or how HIV/AIDS has directly affected us. Within the first week of opening my online Stripathon account, I somehow hit $5,000. I couldn't believe it! I had no idea how it all happened, except perhaps through the generosity of those reading my posts and helping me help others. I was in tears daily. I had no idea what was happening, but I knew to embrace the kindness; and yet, somehow I didn't think I'd ever keep up with that momentum. Boy, was I in for it.

Over the years, I've really learned to have more faith in people than disbelief. And a lot of that new perception comes from this period in my life. That attitude doesn't pertain just to others, but also to myself. I learned to have faith in myself and to appreciate that I had developed a strong voice, one that was based on life experience and growth.

Although I was successfully raising money for the cause, I really wanted to be back on the stage for Broadway Bares. I started to understand what it meant to be a part of something larger than myself, which was something I had also been learning in recovery. Then that day came when emails were sent out announcing the cast of the big show…. I had my offer! I sent in my response—OF COURSE I ACCEPTED!—and I was locked in for Broadway Bares: Strip U.

I was in tears. Everything I had worked on to change myself got me to a place better than I could've ever imagined. This experience was going to be a life-changing moment for me, and I could feel it with every passing moment.

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