Condoms: A Love Story For #InternationalCondomDay

February 13, 2021 By Shawn Decker

You never forget seeing your first condom.

I was probably 10. One day at my grandparent's swimming pool, one of the older boys down the street, a rebel who claimed "Rowdy" Roddy Piper as his favorite wrestler, pulled me aside. "Know what this is?" "A balloon?" I asked. "No, it's a condom!"

I felt like Jimmy Snuka getting a coconut cracked over my head on television- I'd heard the word before but never actually seen the sword's sheath in person. My parents were lax when it came to what my big brother and I could watch on TV- we'd recently gotten HBO and Porky's was a family favorite. Back to Condom Pete... he told me he got the condom out of machine not unlike the ones that I'd put quarters in to get cheap, plastic, tiny football helmets.

This was a helmet for an entirely different head and game.

Condom Pete wasn't soliciting me or anything, and probably wasn't even planning on using it. I think he was just proud that he'd leveled up in life.

At the time I didn't know why anyone would like Roddy Piper so much, and I was a year or so away from being diagnosed with HIV, hitting puberty and discovering that it is more fun to cheer for the bad guys in rasslin.

Fast forward to high school. I'm involved in my first serious relationship with a girlfriend to whom I was extremely sexually attracted to, and the feeling wasn't a one way street. She was a year older than me- which meant she could also drive. My best friend, Mark, knew I was HIV positive but we never openly talked about it. But we were open about our feelings about music, life, more music, and the opposite sex.

When a sleepover with my girlfriend presented itself, Mark gave me a condom. He'd leveled up with his girlfriend, and knew I might be headed in the same direction very soon. It was a kind gesture, but I was kind of freaking out: I hadn't disclosed my HIV status to my girlfriend... my plan was to tell her that night, when we had her parents place to ourselves.

Well, one thing lead to another as the night got later and later... and I still hadn't brought up HIV. So, when the time came to have sex, I just couldn't "fill out" the condom. My penis was

cockblocking me, just limply scolding me. “TELL HER. C’MON, DUDE!” I was worried about having penetrative sex, about the condom breaking… about putting her at risk. I wasn’t afraid of being rejected for having HIV, she was so open about her life and just a decent human being all around. Selfishly, I was afraid of being pitied. And having to think about HIV everyday myself.

That relationship ended when my parents disclosed to hers. Because I was practicing safer sex on the fly- no condoms for oral sex- she had to be tested for HIV, which came back negative, thankfully. She also had to go see my doctor, which was over an hour from where we lived. It was traumatizing, surely, for everyone involved at the time, and I felt so horrible about what I’d put everyone through.

Thankfully, I’d matured a bit by the next time we got together a couple years later when I visited her at college. She had a boyfriend, but we got to spend a whole night together talking and even snuggling up a little. A year later, we were reunited when she was visiting home during a break. I was closer to going public with my status, and it helped me talk about being HIV positive. We snuggled up again- I not only had condom this time, I knew how to use them!

But this time I was the one in a relationship…

After I went public with my HIV status by putting up a website and writing a column for POZ Magazine, I talked to all of my ex-girlfriends, and explained that if I was distant or didn’t let things go too far it was because of my unwillingness to deal with HIV. A huge part of being able to have that confidence and self-awareness was the fact that I learned how to truly practice safe sex… that condoms worked. I could have sex, be HIV positive, keep my partner safe…

You know, be a human being.

After falling in love with a fellow HIV educator in Gwenn, we started a whirlwind romance and a whirlwind educational tour, speaking at colleges and conferences and everywhere in between. I defended the condom’s honor, and always got a laugh when I said that the condom was my trusted friend in life. I’d made peace with the presumed fact that I’d have to use one until the day I got cured, if that day ever emerged. Being on effective HIV treatment, it started to feel greedy to even hope for a cure… I had my health and my love and had somehow survived the 80s and early 90s.

Then several years ago, #UEqualsU happened. My viral load, consistently undetectable, made it possible for me and Gwenn to retire the condom. Looking back, I regret not having a ceremony to honor it’s service, like awarding a Medal of Freedom or hanging some kind of condom wreath on the wall to remember all the good times we had together.

Even though condoms have become a relic of my own sexual history, their place in the world and their purpose have become no less relevant. I’m thankful to the condom for not only for keeping my partners safe, but for being there for so many of us in our lives. Few things can preach about making you not only feel safer, but be safer; the condom actually backs it up on both counts.

And in a world of blustering buffoons, that really counts for something.

So, there may come a time when there’s not enough room in the nightstand for the condom. When the last batch of expired ones are discarded... but, make no mistake, there will always be room in my heart for my dear friend in life... the glorious, and enchanting, condom.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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