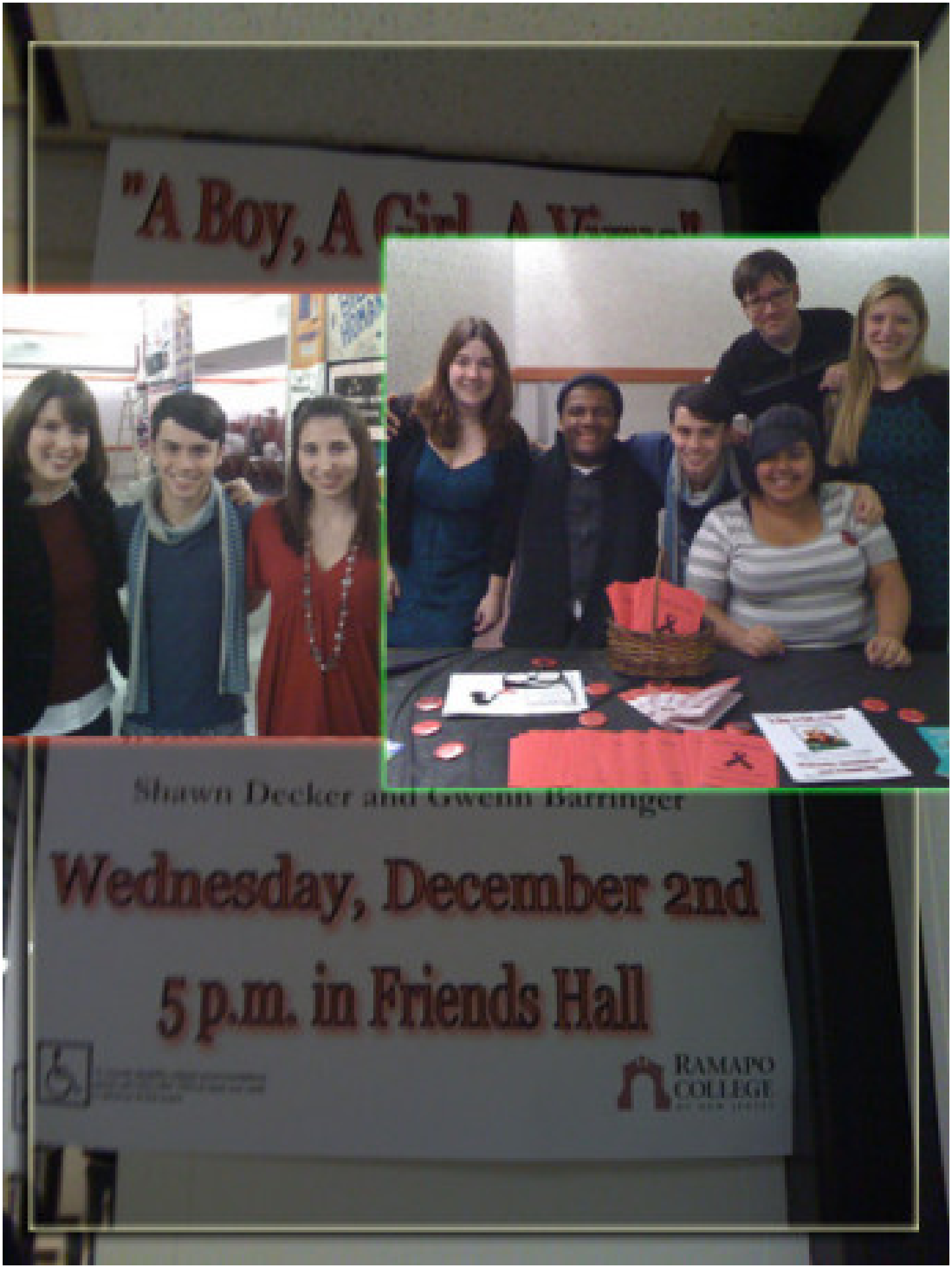
December 2-5: Ramapo, Central Florida and VA Tech

December 20, 2009 By Shawn Decker

December 2-5: After factoring up and getting some rest, I was ready to roll for the rest of the week. Our first stop was Ramapo College in Mahwah, New Jersey. They have an incredible Women's Center on campus, and we met most of the staff who keep condoms in hand and information in mind for the students at Ramapo.



Portions of the AIDS Quilt were on display in the room where we were speaking. The Quilt is always a somber reminder of those we have lost, and the touching tributes by friends and family

always get me choked up. But one panel brought a smile to my face. It had a man's face transposed onto a large, regal dress with an immaculate crown atop his head. Underneath it simply stated: "Queen of Everything", and I could picture his friends gathered together, making it and sharing stories of the benevolent, positoid ruler who lovingly reigned over their clique.

We had a great discussion with students, then got a tour of the Women's Center, where I wanted to steal their condom box... isn't it too cool?

After Ramapo, I was confidant I'd hold up for the rest of the week, and the next morning we flew down to Orlando to speak at the University of Central Florida. I was even able to have a Decker's Daily in the Newark airport, proof that I was on my way back.

Once we arrived in Orlando, we got a bite to eat at TGI Friday's... my dream, once I retire from HIV education, is to start a chain called TMI Friday's, where all the employees are required to not only divulge the daily specials, but also intimate details about their personal lives. As manager, I'd greet every guest with, "How was your food? Great- I've been living with AIDS for over 20 years, have a lovely evening and come back and see us."

After a solid nap, it was time to attend an HIV/AIDS banquet dinner at the University of Central Florida. The name of the event was "What's Your Status?", a play on Facebook status updates tied into HIV testing. During this talk, it was kind of tough to hold back the coughs- which I'm sure gave dramatic impact. The discussion went well; particularly when the topic of flavored condoms came up. (We recommended mint.)

Once we were done, a young man approached us about getting tested- he was worried, and as we spoke with him one of the testing outreach workers at UCF came over. The guy kept talking to us, and it was great to see a student staffed at UCF take over and answer concerns and give all the information about the resources available on campus for testing.

Back in the hotel, I went to sleep with our make-shift humidifier that Gwenn picked up before we left home. You attach a bottled water to it- the only drawback is that this sucker really glows.

The next day we flew back to Virginia for our last talk, an early program at Virginia Tech. We made the decision to fly in and out of Roanoke as opposed to going home to save the drive time from C'ville to Blacksburg... when the forecast started calling for snow, that decision proved to be a wise one.

With a day to kill, we were happy to find that the Hotel Roanoke really went holiday balls out for Christmas. There were about a dozen or more trees on display, decorated by different companies and organizations in town...

The funniest tree was the one made by the Roanoke hospital, it had blood-filled syringes on it, and when my nose startle to trickle a bit in the hotel room, the tree seemed appropriate considering

the week I'd had. Gwenn carried the load for us, that's for sure...

The next morning we drove to Tech as the snow came down. At worst, we'd just stay in town after the talk, but fortunately we were able to make it back to C'ville by avoiding the mountain, my only real contribution to the puzzle that is World AIDS Week traveling.

At Tech we spoke to a roomful of students and did an interview for their campus radio station. What was cool is that we'd been there a couple of years ago, and some of the students who brought us then came to the talk. It was great to catch up and see familiar faces, and afterwards we all cheesed out for a vintage-style picture, which perfectly captured the epicness of World AIDS Week 2009.

A big thanks to everyone who made this week special in Jacksonsville, Mahwah, Orlando and Blacksburg... much thanks to Cathy at UC San Marcos for rescheduling the World AIDS Day talk that we had to cancel, and Scott and Rex for the World AIDS Day iced mocha.

HIV/AIDS awareness education is alive and well, and every year, just after Thanksgiving and before Christmas, I get a vivid reminder that me and my educator friends aren't alone- there are tons of people making a difference, and I'm incredibly honored to do my part and get the opportunity to give a positoid hug to people who dedicate their time and energy to the same cause.

Much love, and happy holidays!

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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