Diving In

June 4, 2006 By Regan Hofmann

I always thought, if I ever found the guts to do it, that I'd tell the world that I have HIV in a slow, relatively controlled, fashion. I'd mention it to a friend here, a family member there. They'd tell two friends, and they'd tell two friends, and so on. And so on.

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Instead, I took the plunge (to use another bad ’70s advertising reference). I put my face on the

April cover of POZ. And before I knew it, my mug was in the New York Times, June Vogue and New York magazine (among other places).

Tomorrow, I am scheduled to appear at 8 a.m. on Good Morning America (where I pray they will give me Diane Sawyer and I pray she will be nice as this is my first time on national TV and I'm not at all a morning person).

People keep asking me what it feels like to disclose so quickly, in such a public way. I've thought a lot about how to explain it. The feeling of telling the world in nearly one fell swoop that you have HIV reminds me of something that happened when I was eight.

I was standing on the diving board of the high dive of my cousin's swim club. I'd managed to get myself up the ladder after bragging that I wasn't afraid to jump. My quick ascent up the shiny metal steps was followed by an embarassing long deliberation on the springy board that jutted over what seemed, from the top of the ladder, to be a very small area of bright blue water. What if I missed? What if, between the time I jumped and the time I landed, the pool got a leak and all the water drained out? What if I landed flat on my back? Or my stomach? What if the force of the fall peeled my swimsuit straight off and I found myself naked, watched by the whole swim club? And what if that happened and no one gave me a towel to cover up my exposed self?

After what felt like two hours, I jumped. Not because I was going to enjoy it, but because it was the lesser of two evils. I decided that any humiliation or bodily harm that could come from leaping into space and hitting the pool was less than what could happen if I skulked back down the ladder like a big fat chicken.

It seems a pretty good analogy for my decision to share my secret that I have HIV with the world. I stood on the diving board of a proverbial high dive for a decade, processing every emotion that comes with HIV, deliberating about whether ridding my life of my weighty secret by sharing it with others who could help me carry the load was better than keeping it to myself. Wondering whether there was any advantage to the community to my opening my mouth. Fearing that my life would change for the worse and I'd be homeless, jobless, friendless and companionless. Finally, I decided disclosure was the lesser of two evils (I was having trouble dealing with the secret after so long) and I somehow mustered the courage to bend my knees and spring into the air. There was enormous relief at being in motion. Because now I had to focus on what was going to happen, not what might.

I found myself freefalling and, amazingly, enjoying the sense of movement after being stuck for so long. It was such a rush to walk to work my first day at POZ. I couldn't believe I'd done it.

But, as I spun through space, I began to have those childhood doubts. Jeez, that pool seems really small. What if there's no water in it when I land? What if I bellyflop? Or, as it related to my new job at POZ: Jeez, what if no one cares? What if people misunderstand why I've come forth and think I'm vain for putting myself on the cover? What if I get weird phone calls from strangers? I actually asked, the night before we went to press, if we could stop the press. Too late, they said. And I was strangely glad to realize that I couldn't undo my decision.

Just as I started to try to back peddle, flailing my arms and legs to slow down my fall, kapow!, I hit the icy water. I felt the full body slap of the pool. There I was, staring at my face, which seemed alien to me, on the cover of my first issue of POZ, hot off the press. My fear of what would happen next made me sink, deep, deeper to the bottom. I could see people standing around the edge of the pool. Anxiety pushed me further under water and the people seemed to get smaller and more blurry. Their voices got softer and more garbled. And the fear set in. I was alone. The weight of my terror pushed me down. Until my feet touched the bottom and I realized I'd survived the fall.

This was about the time that the magazine had been printed and sent out - and we were waiting. Waiting for people's reactions, for the phone to ring, to see if anyone cared. I felt for a week that I was submerged under thousands of gallons of water.

When there didn't seem to be too much excitement at the pool's edge, I pushed off my feet and rose, slowly at first, then faster, to the surface. While I was swimming back up, back to the land of the living and breathing oxygen, the phone rang, and the articles appeared. When my head finally broke through the surface into the daylight, many, many amazing people, including one of my grammar school teachers, long lost friends and roommates from London, men I thought had long since forgotten my name and strangers who felt like people I'd known forever were there to greet me.

I have received so many of the most amazing phone calls and e-mails imaginable. Many of your words are posted in the "from readers" section of this site. There are so many more, I'm going to find a way to share them all eventually. The response has been so incredible because it has shown me how many people, men and women, all ages, genders, sexual orientations, from all walks of life, experience the same issues when living with HIV.

I'd like to say I planned it all carefully - that I synchronized my decision to come forth to highlight the 25th anniversary of the discovery of AIDS. The truth is, it was a happy accident. To have the chance to appear on live television on the exact day that they first announced the disease and to be able to talk about the great need we have for awareness of this disease - today - more than ever - was total serendipity.

The numbers, as we with the disease well know, are staggering. 25 million dead, 41 million living with the virus. What shocks me still is the misperception that this disease is something that primarily affects men. The truth is otherwise. One of out every two people infected globally is a woman. Nearly one of out every three infected in America is a woman. I am AIDS in the 21st century. And I'm gonna keep climbing up that ladder and jumping into the pool, hoping to make a splash, until people sit up and notice that AIDS is far from over. It's exploding all around us, in our backyards, and in our swimclubs.

The National Association of People with AIDS has designated June 27 as National HIV Testing Day. I hope that my leap of faith was not in vain and that watching a skinny blonde chick jump into the drink will remind all people who've ever had sex without a condom to get tested - to protect themselves, their kids, their parents and their friends.

Stay tuned for more...

Regan

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