Five Things I Learned Aboard the HIV Cruise Retreat

December 21, 2015 By Mark S. King

Each year, several hundred people living with HIV - primarily gay men, with a happy sprinkling of straight women and our supporters - embark on the **HIV Cruise Retreat** for a week of fun and frolic on the high seas. The event started with a group of HIV positive friends and has grown enormously over more than a dozen years. The week is organized by one travel agent and a team of dedicated volunteers (and that includes me as one of the hosts and MC).

The days and nights are packed with exclusive shore excursions, private parties and all the perks of being aboard a large passenger ship -- but nothing can compete with the freedom of making new friends without fearing HIV disclosure or stigma.

Here are five things I have learned aboard the HIV Cruise Retreat.

1. We'll take a party over another medical seminar, thank you.

Poz guys are as educated about our condition as ever before, and we're no longer clamoring for the very latest bits of information. Gone are the medical update lectures that were once a staple of the week-long cruise, replaced with more socials (like the infamous Red Party, right) and events like the Dating Game.

2. When searching for friendship, cast a wide net.

Years ago, the cruise provided separate events for the gay men and the (mostly female) heterosexuals. It just didn't feel right to be kept apart. The gays actually loved the sense of family the women brought onboard, and the women loved our joy and uncanny ability to nail loungewear. The groups joined forces, and today some of the deepest bonding has nothing to do with sexual orientation or any of the other ways in which we often separate ourselves from potential friendships. It's an important lesson for us all.

3. A zip line is the great equalizer.

It does not matter if that hunk you have been cruising by the pool puts the mucho in macho. When you have been pushed off a wooden platform a million feet above the ground and are whizzing across a thin steel cable, everyone screams like a girl. Not that there's anything wrong with that. (There's some rather acrobatic zip lining happening in the cruise video, above.)

4. Long term survivors are particularly hungry for community.

Growing older is never a picnic - and that goes double for a gay man - but long-term HIV survivors have additional challenges ranging from survivor's guilt to post-traumatic stress disorder. "Long time survivors really love the idea of getting away from it all with friends who really get it," said Paul Stalbaum, the travel agent who has organized the cruise for the last 12 years and is a longtime survivor himself. "That may be why so many 'men of a certain age' join the cruise each year," Stalbaum added. "The older survivors bond over shared histories while the younger cruisers have a ready-made group of mature friends and mentors." If everyone rallies together for an afternoon of mud masks on the beach (above), all the better.

5. Sharing our greatest challenge is the very thing than can help someone else.

Before I said a word to other cruisers, I already knew them. Or at least, I knew a large and significant part of their lives. Being in each other's company, whether or not the topic of HIV came up in conversation, brought a kind of immediate intimacy that is difficult to describe. It reminded me that the meaning of life is to take that about which we have the most shame or difficulty and use it as a tool to help someone else.

The 2016 HIV Cruise Retreat is a Caribbean voyage from Ft. Lauderdale, October 29 - November 6th. Find out more **here** or contact agent Paul Stalbaum at 888-640-7447.

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