Happy World AIDS Day? Now where are my presents?

December 2, 2008 By Paul Dalton

As everyone knows yesterday was the day for the world to pay attention to AIDS. As a person with AIDS, and someone who is fortunate enough to pull a paycheck fighting this scourge, Word AIDS Day is not particularly impactful to me.

Yesterday morning- like every morning- I woke up, made myself a pot of coffee and read the New York Times. Expecting to find a boilerplate article for WAD- ?we?ve come so far, we have so far to go?- instead I was brought back to one of the most poignant moments in my AIDS story.

The article in question was not about AIDS. It was about Kalaupapa, the world famous quarantine for people with Hansen?s Disease- otherwise known as a leper colony. Kalaupapa is on small, relatively undeveloped island of Molokai, where the tallest building is something like 3 stories. It is surrounded by some of the world?s highest sea cliffs- making it an ideal place to isolate people. It is also preposterously beautiful.

I visited there back when I was pretty sick. It was my first visit to Hawaii, and I wanted to check this place out. To get there I had to hike down a long, steep, switch-back trial for about an hour. Once there I was greeted by the residents who gave us a tour and history of this place.

Some of the people I spoke with were among the first to be treated successfully for Hanson?s. At the time, I had recently begun taking HIV meds. I felt connected to them, in a sort of way.

Many parallels have been drawn between HIV and leprosy. The similarities are fairly obvious. The thing about my visit there was it was the first time where I imagined myself as a survivor of HIV. I saw these people who had been wrenched from their lives, from their families, from their communities, isolated in a remote if beautiful place, and outlived their disease.

I don?t know if I will outlive HIV. But my visit to Kalaupapa gave me hope that I might.

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