Home on the Range

May 2, 2008 By Paul Dalton

One of the perks of my job is travel. Some destinations- Dublin, Ireland, Sydney, Australia- are more glamorous than others- Fresno, California or the lovely Philadelphia Airport Ramada Inn. Outside of my home state of California, the state I have visited the most in my 6 ½ years at PI might surprise you. Not New York, not Florida, not Illinois, not even Texas.

The answer: Montana. What might surprise some even more, is I love Montana.

In all, I think I have been to Montana 10 times- once for a GSK meeting and the others for a series of retreats for people living with HIV. Each year they hold three such events- one for women, one for gay men and one for couples (defined however one wants). I have been doing treatment updates at the men?s and couple?s retreats regularly for the past 5 years.

Why do I love Montana? Some of it is the scenery- most of it is the community. Rural states, with their widely dispersed populations face unique challenges in the epidemic. One of those challenges is isolation. The opportunity for people to come from the far corners of the vast state of Montana to come together and create a temporary community of people with HIV is powerful and necessary

I have always felt very welcomed in Montana. The people I meet are kind, warm and appreciative. Some wear cowboy hats.

I write this at the Salt Lake City airport, on my way to Helena. As I type I look up at the snow covered mountains just outside the airport and feel an unexpected sense of home. While it is no doubt an exaggeration, I feel like I have gotten to know every person living with HIV in the state. Twice a year, I feel like an honorary Montanan. For that I am grateful.

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