Long Blonde Hair and AIDS and All

July 18, 2006 By Regan Hofmann

Forgive my absence in the blogosphere! I'm back. Hmmmm....where to start? First, the news. Things have been heating up significantly at POZ headquarters...Marvelyn Brown (our POZ covergirl in January '06 and spokeswoman extraordinaire) has joined our team and we're delighted to have her. We're working away on several big ideas to pitch at the International World AIDS conference in Toronto this August. (We plan to have those ideas come to fruition on World AIDS Day come December and will share them with you as soon as we can.) I have been appointed to the board of directors of NAPWA (The National Association of People Living With AIDS) and London's interest in the POZ story has been piqued...get ready for some breaking press on the other side of the pond. I've met lots of wonderful, HIV-savvy celebs (Kathy Bates, Tea Leoni, Miss Universe, Lucy Liu, Rosie Perez, and Gabriel Byrne, to name a few) and am slowly, but surely, making my rounds within the HIV/AIDS community, meeting many more incredible and inspiring people.

A notable example is Anthony Richardson, executive director of Perceptions for People With Disabilities (differentfolks.org), whom I met in Washington, DC at the press conference for National HIV Testing Day. Anthony lost his eyesight due to HIV-related illness but managed to be one of the few who braved the flood waters (that rolled in the night before) to attend the conference. I found it amazing that while the national and regional press (save for a few tenacious souls) couldn't seem to navigate their way across the watery capital to hear about the importance of HIV testing, a blind man and his dog got there with no trouble from NYC. Okay, well, maybe not "no" trouble - it WAS quite a deluge.

The day after the ill-attended press conference, on June 27th, I joined Frank Oldham, executive director of NAPWA, Doug Michels, CEO of Orasure Technologies and Thomas Frieden, commisioner of the NYC Department of Health to open the NASDAQ. They blasted the announcement that it was National HIV Testing Day in several-story-high digital letters above Times Square. It was pretty awesome to see the name of our disease looming above the throngs wandering around in the neon glow. It was also pretty awesome to see how oblivious many seemed to the message...I had envisioned a stampede of newly enlightened folks rushing from Times Square to the nearest testing site to find out their HIV status. However, reality checked me and instead, I took solace in the fact that at least several NASDAQ staffers were inspired by our announcement to get tested. We need to figure out how to get more people aware and motivated next year.

Which brings me to the meat of this blog.

Many people have asked about what it's been like to disclose publicly and whether I feel that doing so has made an impact. As to the first question, I can unequivocally say that it does feel great. The fear is gone. I am still here. The shock and awe are over and except for people I've never met before to whom I have to tell the news, thing have mostly returned to normal in my life. Some of my fellow HIV-positive peers have written to say that they've also disclosed since I spilled the beans and that they're doing okay, too. I think that's great. Sometimes, I feel a little like the first one back in the ocean after a shark attack. You know, I'm the dumb one who wades in first while others watch from the shore to see if I'm going to be ripped limb from limb before joining me. I have to say, so far, no dorsal fins. C'mon in if you'd like. The more the merrier. There is great power in facing your greatest fear and having it not kill you or destroy your life, as we so often imagine our greatest fear can. I'm not saying it's been fun, fun, and lots more fun. I've been terrified, criticized, looked at funny and told, by an HIV-positive man, no less, that I'm not someone they want to associate themselves with because I am publicly associated with AIDS. BUT, mostly, it's been just dandy. The best reaction I've gotten so far? I went to a party where I saw a casual acquaintance who'd heard the news. The last time I saw him, three years ago, I had short, black hair (that's a story for another blog). So, when he walked into the party and saw me, he boomed, "Hey, look at you! Long, blonde hair and AIDS and all!" (might be a good title for my memoir: Long Blonde Hair and AIDS and All.) While I was stunned (though not as much as those other guests who had no idea about my status), I also found myself laughing. In a way, wasn't his reaction what I dreamed of? To see AIDS handled in as casual a way as my latest haircolor? It was oddly refreshing to hear it expressed in such an offhand way.

As to the impact of my disclosure, it's hard to measure. Everyone's been so supportive, but I've often wondered whether the news that I have HIV actually motivates people to change their behavior. So, I've started asking around: Have you been tested? Do you know your partner's status? Are you using protection?

One probe into a female friend's life surprised me. She is recently out of a long-term relationship and shared with me that she slept with "her new man."

Me: Did you get tested together?

Friend: No.

Me: Do you know his HIV status?

Friend: No.

Me: Well, then I'm sure you used protection, right?

Friend: Well, he was married and had only one other girlfriend.

Me: Arrrrrrrrrrgggggggghhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!

I mean, come on! Anyone hot enough for my hot friend to date has NOT had two lovers in his life.

Especially when his life spans four decades.

I was driving when she told me the news, and I pulled off the highway to yell at her. I am not normally a hot head, but her conviction that he was telling her the truth and her naivety about his status infuriated me. I said to her, “Listen, while you’re at it, why don’t you just do a few shots of hard alcohol, get in your car, leave the seat belt off, blindfold yourself and drive around at 70 miles an hour and see what happens?!” Okay, so it was a little excessive, but how could she believe that it couldn’t happen to her when it had happened to someone just like her? Then, I calmed down and said, “If I can’t influence even my best friends to take care of themselves, how am I going to convince strangers that they need to practice safer sex?” There was a long silence. Then, I asked her, “What’s the issue? Do you really think you’re immune?” And then, she surprised me. “I’m embarassed to buy condoms.” WHAT!? She continued: “I know the guy at our local Duane Reade. He’s the son of a friend of mine and I don’t want to be seen buying condoms.” Well, at least now I had something concrete to address. “Let me get this straight, ” I aid. “You have the courage and resolve and self esteem to extract yourself from a bad relationship. You found a man you think might be the man of your dreams. But you are not going to protect his life and yours because you are afraid to appear sexually responsible in front of your friend’s son!?” I continued. “You get over to that Duane Reade and you get condoms in every shape and size and modality and you plop them on the counter in front of that teenager and if he even looks at you sideways, you tell him that at least you respect yourself enough to take responsibility for your own life. Oh, and at least you’re getting laid. A lot.” She laughed. I did not. “One last thing,” I said. “I am not coming to your art opening (she’s an artist) until I see PROOF.”

I hung up the phone and eased my car back on the highway. I drove, for a while, feeling like my disclosure might have been in vain, after all. I seriously doubted my ability to inspire others to avoiding contracting HIV if I couldn’t persuade my closest friends that the threat was real, and all around them. I worked through the day, but with the wind very much out of my sails, until late afternoon, when my phone buzzed. There was a text message from my friend.

It read (sic): Duane reade-trojan 12 v thin lub-$9.75.

And I allowed myself a tiny cheer. One down, several hundred million more to go.

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