Medical Leave (from this month’s Poz)

October 30, 2007 By Shawn Decker

I posted a blog several months ago about the passing of my first HIV doc, Dr. Lyman Fisher. In this month’s Poz, I wrote a column about him, you can read it below, and check out the new issue HERE.
Positively Yours,
Shawn

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Medical Leave

by Shawn Decker

Shawn Decker never thought he?d outlive his HIV doc?so he never said goodbye.

A Canadian fella in his late 50s who zipped around the hospital faster than a teenager on Jolt, Dr. Lyman Fisher was a person my mom called ?a very important man.? She hoped against hope that he would figure out a way to beat HIV?and I, a recently diagnosed positoid kid in the late 1980s, resented him for doing his job. Which was, ironically, finding a way to keep me around.

It wasn?t that I didn?t like Dr. Lyman, a hematologist who became an HIV specialist by default when just about all of his patients tested positive. It was that his monitoring techniques?the lab work, the poking and the prodding?cramped my style. I didn?t need to check my CD4 count to know I was going to die?maybe not tomorrow but definitely sooner than my parents, my friends and the good doctor himself. And since there were no treatments besides AZT monotherapy (which I nixed) back then, the trips to the hospital seemed pointless.

But as years went on, I grew up a little bit. I started to get comfortable with the routine, as well as the thought that I might stick around for a while longer. I stopped being such a dick about going to the appointments, and though I remained publicly mum about my virus, Dr. Lyman kept me in the loop on treatment developments. He shared promising information on pills in the pipeline and sent me postcards from the many conferences he attended in the United States and abroad. He even invited me along, but I was a teenager with no interest in an AIDS event.

Like any other teen, I spoke in code, one that never used the terms ?HIV? or ?AIDS.? Dr. Lyman understood, and I began to see him as less of a doctor and more of a friend. Especially when he?d treat my mom and me to lunch after the appointments at a diner called, perhaps appropriately, the Skull and Bones, where I?d always order a grilled cheese sandwich. At 20 I went public with my status, and Dr. Lyman was one of the first people I called for advice. Delighted, he sent me my first copies of POZ and directed me to an AIDS service organization in the area, where I met others who were living with HIV.

And then, in 1999, he retired. As a parting gift, he prescribed Marinol to combat my dwindling appetite and weight, and I was able to eat my first grilled cheese in months.

I regained my health and lost touch with Dr. Lyman, who was beginning to struggle with advanced Parkinson?s Disease. In 2004, I invited him to my wedding, but he was unable to attend because of his own health concerns. A few months ago, I got word that Dr. Lyman passed to spirit, and I was unable to attend to his funeral?because I had committed to the NY AIDS Walk: an AIDS event.

I can?t believe I outlived that liveliest of fellas. I somehow made it to adulthood and I will never take that for granted. Now that I?m here, I wish that in Dr. Lyman?s final years I had sent him a couple of postcards from the AIDS conferences I now attend. Or popped in for a visit.

I would even be willing to revisit those stressful, confusing days when his office was the last place I wanted to be, when my attitude was sour and his energy was boundless. I?d love the chance to sit down again at the Skull and Bones with Dr. Lyman Fisher, have a grilled cheese, give him one more hug and tell him that he is indeed a very important man.

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