About My ’Meth Weekend’ in Palm Springs...

February 12, 2016 By Daniel Pintauro

On Saturday, February 6, I received a lovely award from a terrific organization in Palm Springs, California, the Desert AIDS Project. They are amazing and I’m so honored to have been given the award. There were 1,400 people there, from all walks of life, every level of income, both gay and straight and everything in between. I was determined to speak with brutal honesty and hopefully shine a spotlight on a big problem in the gay community, particularly in Palm Springs. That audience didn’t know it, but they heard a story that I have only told to a select few friends in my life over the years... and now I share that story with you. You’ve heard me say some of the latter half of this speech before, but it’s so good it’s worth repeating... and I will be repeating it until we fix the meth problem in this country. Look, there’s a lot of great talk about seeing an end to the AIDS epidemic - that end will come sooner if we take Meth more seriously.

Here is the text of my Palm Springs speech:

As you can imagine, the last five months have been a whirlwind, both wonderful and challenging in many ways. Though my initial decision to come out to Oprah Winfrey about having HIV and having contracted HIV while using crystal meth was terrifying, each day still carries of moment of terror as I wonder if I made the right decision. Celebrities/child celebrities are used to having the spotlight on them, but that’s often to talk about what they’re wearing, not their viral load or safer sex practices. Being so forthcoming on a global scale has forced me to spend a lot of time evaluating my life, who I am, where I’ve come from, and where I’m going more than any other time. I mean, it doesn’t get much more public than Oprah, right??

Palm Springs holds a place in the “where I’ve come from” category, both as a place I love and a place in which I’ve made some bad decisions. One day many years ago, I was in the middle of a meth fueled weekend sitting naked in front of my computer trying to find more meth and more sex. After looking online for hours, I found someone here in Palm Springs who had a friend, a sling, and meth. So I decided to meet them. I decided, after having done meth earlier in the day, to drive from LA to Palm Springs to hang out with these two guys. And, after having done a lot more meth and other drugs, I drove back to Los Angeles. It’s a miracle that I wasn’t pulled over or got into an accident or worse.

I’ve been thinking a lot about those two guys since the day I was contacted by Desert AIDS Project back in September. What happened to them? Did they get on the path to recovery, or are they out there now having another “meth” weekend? My hope is that they came to the Deserts AIDS Project and are in a healthier and happier place in their lives. But, I can’t help wonder if they are even still alive.

Shortly after that drive, I decided to get clean, stay clean, get my act together and move forward (not sideways), laying the first bricks on a long road. But I'm proud to say tonight, in front of this welcoming, passionate, and good-looking crowd, that this award, in so many ways, completes a huge life circle and reinforces that I have made the right decisions.

There were many moments along the road forward I could have veered off, both because of meth and HIV, but somehow I managed to stay on track. That road is no different from anyone who comes to the Desert AIDS Project looking for help, maybe magnified by the ever looming fear that The Enquirer will find out and yet ... for so many, the fear and stigma associated with HIV feels like the whole world will find out. The second you step foot into an HIV clinic "Everyone will know." It takes bravery just to get tested; it takes bravery to step into the clinic to seek help and care. Stigma is alive and well, but it shouldn't be so scary. And thanks to the Desert AIDS Project, it is so much less scary here in the Coachella Valley ... their "Get Tested" outreach program and their tireless effort to make their clinic feel like a safe place and second home for their clients goes a long, long way.

I've been through a lot over the years, and sometimes when you're "in it" you can't see the bigger picture, you can't see that other people might be going through the exact same things as you. But I've been speaking to a lot of people since September and I'm learning that my story is not unique. I'm not alone in finding that my depression and self-doubt are partly fueled by my latent struggles with being gay, and they are certainly fueled by the immense stigma I felt about being HIV positive. And I'm not alone in turning to a drug that removes all of that self-doubt, depression and internalized stigma and replaces it, albeit for a short time, with feelings of invincibility, strength and confidence. I'm so thrilled and thankful that DAP is "doing something about it" by launching the Crystal Meth Action Team... I'm so proud of them and I urge all of you to get involved in some way.

There is absolutely no better way to talk about HOW to get involved than to quote the men who bravely took steps to address the meth problem in New York City in 2005. In the best tradition of community self-empowerment, gay men sought to educate and mobilize other gay men to address a critical issue facing the community. Peter Staley and others from the Crystal Meth Working Group put up posters all over the city and even bought a full-page ad in the New York Times. It read in part:

So, here's what we're going to do. We will take responsibility for our lives and for the health of our community. We will make informed choices about sex and partying, and urge our friends and lovers to do the same. We will talk to others about the dangers of crystal meth. We will create honest prevention campaigns so that everyone knows the real risks of meth use. We will

show compassion for those who are addicted. Meth is the problem, not those in its grasp. Addicts need treatment, not stigma. And finaly, we won't let crystal meth destroy another generation of gay men.

That was over a decade ago, but their messages are as relevant today as they were then, especially since Peter Staley just wrote about new data showing a huge increase in Meth use in New York City over the last three years.

I'm proud to receive this honor this legacy of activism, but I'm more proud to stand with Desert AIDS Project whose programs and services are on the forefront of compassionate care for the Coachella Valley. And I'm proud to be a part of this loving, caring community that supports organizations like D.A.P. - because D.A.P. reflects the very best of what we are as a community.

To find out more about D.A.P., visit desertaidsproject.org.

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