NATIONAL AIDS AWARENESS MONTH

October 20, 2007 By Regan Hofmann

I am afraid to count the number of days since I last blogged. I know I was in Australia and that was some time in August. It wouldn't be one of my blogs unless I started with a mea culpa for my absence. What can I say? The time flies and there is so much to do and so little of the flying time in which to do it. Anyway, I'm back.

So I got up this morning and as I carved out a sizeable wedge of my Entenmann's raspberry twist danish, I realized that the box was covered with pink ribbons and messages about breast cancer awareness. And thinking back to my last visit to Shoprite, as I piled my food onto the beltway to check out, I noticed that the coffee cake was not the only edible vehicle of breast cancer awareness. My bread and my M&Ms were also emblazoned with pink-lettered messenging. Heck, the M&Ms themselves were pink and white. So were the Tic Tacs. I have to give it to the girls behind breast cancer--the Susan G. Komen Foundation has really gone beyond the pale to ensure that everyone - EVERYONE - knows that October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. All over America I'm sure women are plowing through their pink chocolate covered candies while waiting to be screened for cancer.

As I ate my cake, I had to wonder, why is there no National AIDS Awareness Month? I know we have World AIDS Day, coming up on December 1st. And there's National HIV Testing Day each year in June, but why does AIDS get only two days and breast cancer gets 31? The answer is that there's no organization in the AIDS community pushing for public, month-long awareness the way Komen does. And it's a shame. Because the stats for women (people!) contracting HIV are certainly dire enough to warrant such a month of focus.

At my previous magazine, I wrote our annual feature story about breast cancer for three years. The final year I wrote about it, I was invited to a "Survivors Ball" held at a swanky hotel in northern NJ. I remember that a wealthy, and anonymous, patron had donated hundreds of the most beautiful pink peonies I have ever seen. The whole ballroom was awash in fuschia and 800 women came together that night to celebrate their survival - and remember the ones who had been lost to the disease.

At one point, a Latina woman who knew I was writing the story approached me and said she wanted to show me something. She led me to the ladies room, lifted her blouse, opened her stuffed brassiere and showed me two horrific circular scars where her breasts had once been. She'd had a double masectomy in the 1960s and had not been given the option to reconstruct her breasts. It looked like they'd been removed with a chainsaw. I steadied mysef and after redressing she said, "Only you and my husband have seen what they did to me. I have been ashamed of myself for 45 years. But tonight, I am no longer ashamed. I am proud I have lived and I now know that I am still a complete woman even without my breasts. I just wanted you to know that."

I think I staggered out of that bathroom. 45 years of shame. I'd had 10 with my HIV. I knew was she had

felt, but I wasn't about to let my HIV cat out of the bag, not that night, not in that setting. I wasn't ready then.

I thanked her for sharing her story with me and returned to my table. The evening was coming to a crescendo - the band fired up Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" and 800 women danced and sang out at the top of their lungs and cried and waved handfuls of peonies about. I was so grateful that so many people were crying because it seemed perfectly normal that water would be running down my face - I was the compassionate journalist, right? Caught up in the moment, totally empathisizing with a throng of incredible women who cheered for their tenacity and cried for the inevitable casualties of a deadly disease.

I cried for all that, but I also cried for all those living with HIV/AIDS and all those who'd died from it. And I cried because it seemed so incredibly wrong that a group of AIDS survivors couldn't have a similar ball, in a fancy ballroom, with big red flowers on the table. Since that night, I have hoped that someday those of us living with HIV will be able to celebrate as openly as those women who had beaten breast cancer.

I think it's reasonable to expect that if people can be sitting down to breakfast, slicing up sweet, sticky pieces of coffee cake that remind them to get tested (early! early detection equals survival!) for breast cancer, that we can do the same thing for AIDS. Personally, I think AIDS can become as socially acceptable a disease as breast cancer. And I think the messaging should be similar: take control of your life - know your status.

I look forward to the day when I'll be eating my Entenmann's AIDS coffee cake, grateful for the survival of many, paying tribute to those who have passed, and feeling calmer knowing that people all across America are thinking matter of factly about the need to get tested for HIV.

Maybe I'm naive, but I think that if the companies who support breast cancer would do the same thing for AIDS, it would help to normalize the disease. Putting AIDS out into the open, and onto, say, a bag of bite-sized Snickers bars, might go a long way towards helping people understand that this is just another disease that can affect everyone - a disease that is best fought if addressed as early as possible.

I think I'm gonna call a few of those companies and see what they'd say...

I'd love to hear your thoughts on the matter!

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