National HIV Testing (My Patience) Day

June 25, 2010 By Shawn Decker

Sunday is National HIV Testing Day. So get tested. Know your status. I know mine. If you don't know yours it means I am a better person than you because I know my status. Assume you're negative? Well, I'm still better than you because I *know* I'm positive.

And, as a result, I know what I need to do to protect my wife partner, Gwenn.

Speaking of, yesterday we had to pleasure of speaking at a Planned Parenthood summer workshop for teenagers in the community. It was a quaint group of about 8 people, and when we arrived an educator from AIDS Services Group was explaining in graphic detail how to use a condom properly, complete with a fake penis and a fake vagina. She also ran through an example of why lube is important by having the group make a fist, then try to insert a finger. After lubing up the finger and area by the pinky on the fisted hand- voila!- the finger entered with ease. "Score!" One teenager yelled. I felt like a soccer fan watching the World Cup.

"Goooooooal!"

It was very inspiring to see Planned Parenthood taking an interest in giving area teenagers the information they need to protect themselves, and then teaching them how to educate their peers as well. After the lube was washed off their hands and everyone had lunch, Gwenn and I discussed how we met, got involved in HIV prevention... I talked about my experiences as someone living with HIV, particularly my own teen experience of being curious about sex and trying to manage that with my HIV status. Then we explained how we make our relationship work in terms of a healthy sex life. One of the questions we got was: "What about the "M" word?"

"Huh?"

"Marriage?"

It wasn't asked with judgment, just out of curiosity. Another participant chided, "Don't you see the rings?!" Then the girl looked closer, before exclaiming. "You are married? But you're so... cool!" It was a heartening moment, and I am very thankful that young folks can still relate to me and not hold my advancing age or wedding ring against me.

The workshop took place at a church, which was kind of cool. But in my ideal world every public

school in the United States would be putting on these kinds of demonstrations, having these kinds of open discussions about sex. God knows parents aren't doing this at home, and the vast majority of teenagers will learn through trial and error. And some will come out of their experiences luckier than others and sans a baby or a lifelong sexually transmitted infection. I gotta say, after fourteen years of being public with my status, and writing and speaking about HIV prevention issues, I'm starting to lose my patience with the lack of comprehensive sex education for our nation's youth.

So, as another HIV Testing Day nears, we all have to think about what we need to do as a community to insure that those tests come back negative, that people who walk into a testing facility are confident that they did everything in their power to protect themselves.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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