Non-Uniform Inker

February 19, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

Okay, some of you have already seen that I?m in Kenneth Cole?s new Spring 2008 fashion campaign. For those who haven?t, I wanted to tell you about it. Not to self-promote, but because it is a great campaign with other people who, according to the folks at Kenneth Cole, ?replace stereotypical models with bold, unexpected people of substance.? (Marketing people make everything sound great.) The campaign uses the new media cleverly to get across the point that, as the tagline says, ?We all walk in different shoes.? It?s based on the notion of 25 years of non-uniform thinking, alluding to Kenneth Cole?s untraditional approach of using his multimillion dollar ad campaigns to not only sell shoes, handbags and clothes, but to sensitize people?s minds, making them aware of critical social issues and maybe even encouraging them to change their behavior for the better.

In this era when we discuss things like whether too much U.S. money is being spent on AIDS overseas (it is not, we just simultaneously need additional funding allocated to prevent AIDS in America and to help Americans living with AIDS) or whether spending millions to raise millions to fight AIDS is a viable equation (it is, if it raises money that would never have been raised otherwise), I think it?s interesting that money can be doubly-purposed?in this case, to sell fashion and to open minds.

Everyone in the campaign has an amazing story to tell of overcoming a different challenge. What was interesting was that my challenge?HIV?was hard to show. One woman, Aimee Mullins, is an incredible athlete with artificial legs. A young man, Sonny Caberwal, dresses in the traditional clothing of a practicing Sikh while speaking out against racial profiling. People can see the obstacles they had to overcome. But HIV? How to best show that?

We decided on a faux-tattoo on my arm because I once was going to brand myself, visibly, with ?HIV+.? In the early days of living with HIV, I knew the importance of telling people that I was positive, but it was so hard. I was so afraid of rejection. I thought if my body said it, then my lips might not have to. But, I also thought there may come a day when they?d cure HIV and then I really wouldn?t want the tattoo. I decided that I would just summon the courage to speak up.

I didn?t always, at first. So I left a lot of people confused about why I would suddenly just vanish from their lives. It was just that when I met someone new, I wasn?t sure how they?d react and if I got the sense that they would reject me, I?d just skip disclosure all together. But, of course, when it came to potential sexual partners, this wasn?t an option (I didn?t want to expose anyone to the virus with or without their knowing, even if everything was protected) so, I walked away from a bunch of people never really knowing what they?d say if I told them.

Now in my 11th year of living with HIV, it?s gotten easier to disclose. The funny thing is, I still have to do it all the time. I thought after spending the last two years taking openly in public about HIV, I?d get to the point where I wouldn?t have to disclose. But there are lots of people who don?t read POZ, don?t watch

Oprah and still haven?t seen the Kenneth Cole campaign. So, when I say I work for ?POZ? they hear ?PAWS? and think I write about cats and dogs.

It?s been an incredibly liberating journey for me. A little over two years ago, I was in shock waiting for the April 2006 POZ cover to hit the streets and waiting for a story about my appointment at POZ to break in the New York Times newspaper. Then, I was scared out of my mind about what would happen. A little over two weeks ago, the day that the Kenneth Cole campaign came out in the New York Times newspaper, I was surprisingly calm. I realized I?ve become so matter-of-fact about disclosing my HIV status that I have to remind myself that it is still shocking to people.

I guess the point is that even the most shocking news becomes banal when told over and over. And, as someone once said to me in my early days at POZ, ?Don?t worry, you?ll be yesterday?s news soon enough.? That was a relief, then. Now, I hope lots of people see this campaign and I hope it shocks them into the reality that while people discriminate against other people for all sorts of things, AIDS is the ultimate equal opportunity offender and it can, and does, happen to every sort of person in the world.

Oh yeah, and I?m rethinking that tattoo. The creative director, who calls the people in the campaign ?non-uniform thinkers,? said I was a ?non-uniform inker.? I like the ring of that. I think it might me time for my body to make a statement that my lips are all too familiar uttering.

Let me know what you think of the campaign?and the ink!

To see the YouTube teaser ad, click here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xT3DL6ng8EA

To see the print ad and the video on kennethcole.com, click here:
http://www.kennethcole.com/thinkers/bio5.asp

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