Nothing to Hide

March 4, 2008 By David Weiss

I?ve been dancing around this one for awhile, but I guess its my responsibility to ?fess up and face the music.

In the two or three months that I?ve been blogging here, the one theme that keeps bobbing its nasty little head up on the surface of the blogosphere is the stigma that most of the non-positive world assigns to people with HIV. I keep trying to push that sucker back down, but the fact is that I?ve been contributing to that stigma by hiding my face from the world. When Peter Staley and the folks here at POZ/AIDSMEDS invited me to write for them I agreed to do it with the understanding that instead of showing a clear picture of my face, I would post using only a filtered image. Its been great being able to write for you, but I haven?t been helping our community by hiding my face from the rest of the world. Its time I put a stop to it.

My name is David, and I have HIV.

I have had HIV since 1979 or 1980.

I?ve been incredibly fortunate. As I?ve said before, I?ve probably been living with HIV for as long or longer than any heterosexual human being in the world. Although I?ve had my share of medical lumps, bumps and bruises over the years, few of them were really HIV related. HIV was and still is a deadly virus, but it isn?t so much the fact of HIV that makes the non-positive world view us with disgust, disdain or pity as it is the underlying assumptions that people make that we are foolish or weak or wicked. Well, I?ve got news for you: I?m certainly not a perfect human being by a long shot, but I?ve done things in my 28 years of living with HIV that most people can?t even imagine.

While living with HIV I finished college and went to New York Law School, from which I graduated with honors in 1984. While in law school, I won the Eastern regional ?best oralist? (!) title in the 1983 Jessup International Law moot court competition. I went on to place fourth in the world championships in Washington, D.C.

After law school I became associated with radical lawyer Lynne Stewart, the attorney convicted by the US government and sentenced to prison for assisting the terrorist blind sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, who organized the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. I established my own practice in New York City in 1986 at 305 Broadway in Lower Manhattan before moving to 41 Madison Avenue, at the northeast corner of Madison Square park. In 1989, one year after I tested positive, I became one of the youngest lawyers ever appointed to the federal Criminal Justice Act panel of defense lawyers in the Southern District of New York. In 1991 I won the case of United States v Nelson Cuevas-Ramirez, becoming the first and only criminal defense lawyer in the history of the United States to win a complete acquittal of a foreign national extradited from his home country by the US. Two years later, I persuaded the US

government to drop all charges against one of three crew members captured aboard the cocaine smuggling fishing vessel Endeavor II, which had been seized off Panama loaded with 2000 kilograms of cocaine.

In 1995 I represented Luis Felipe, a/k/a ?King Blood?, said to have been the founder of the Latin Kings gang in New York and charged with having ordered other gang members to execute his victims. My other clients have included John Surgent, the accused mastermind behind an alleged 46 million dollar stock swindle, and 1970’s narcotrafficker Nicky ?Mr. Untouchable? Barnes (you may remember him from ?American Gangster?.) There have been many more, and I?m still at it, practicing as a criminal defense lawyer in the New York area and nationwide federal courts. Most of my federal work is now in the Eastern District of New York, where I am still on the CJA defender panel.

I?m not telling you this to brag about it - I am telling you this because its an example of how accomplished many of us are and what we can do. Nor do I wish to engage you in a debate about the American legal system. For better or worse, the system works, and not all of the people who become entangled in the legal system are bad people - some of them are perfectly decent and honorable folks who trip up. Life is complicated. Some of my clients are guilty and some are innocent. A lot of what criminal lawyers do is damage control - helping people get past the past. I suppose there is an irony in all of that, since I wouldn?t have HIV myself if I hadn?t used IV drugs some 30 odd years ago, but the fact is that these days I?m one of the good guys in our system, despite all of the stereotypes you see on TV and in the movies. And I am proud of that.

So here I am. A reasonably smart, reasonably regular guy, making a living and getting along.
And on top of that, I?m one of the best Scrabble players you?ll ever lose to.

Stigma is only a seven point word. It isn?t worth wasting the ?S? on.

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