An Exciting New Chapter From ’Positive’ Young Author Paige Rawl

Paige Rawl’s riveting memoir of teenage life with HIV is a Today show book club pick, and she’s the subject of an upcoming Andrew Jenks documentary. But her advocacy takes on much more than the virus.

October 31, 2014 By Trent Straube

While getting ready for work earlier this week, I felt a creeping anxiety. I was slated to debut my POZ blog this week, and I had no idea what to write about. Then I heard a voice. No, not the mystical Joan-of-Arc kind of voice. This one came from the living room TV. It was NBC’s Jenna Bush Hager talking about Paige Rawl, who was born with HIV and whose memoir, *Positive*, details her teenage life with the virus.

That was it! My debut topic. I had reviewed Paige’s memoir for POZ’s September issue and was blown away by how smart and entertaining it was. (Seriously, read it now. It’s on a HarperCollins imprint.) After some cursory googling, I discovered that the *Today* show picked the memoir for its book club, and that both Jenna and Paige will be speakers at a November 14 forum in New York City titled "Rebels With a Cause: Igniting a Culture of Activism in Youth," sponsored by The Atlantic and the MAC AIDS Fund.

Ever since reading the book and meeting her at a publishing event (pictured above), I had wanted to write more about Paige, and here was my chance. Below is an emailed correspondence with her. I’m sure you’ll find her inspiring too.

Your memoir ended with you starting college in your home state of Indiana. Can you give us an update on your life and future plans?
I have finished my freshman year at Ball State University. I ended my second semester with a 4.1 GPA. My plans are to finish my degree in molecular biology. This past year, I spent time filming a documentary produced and directed by Andrew Jenks. This documentary, sponsored by the MAC AIDS Fund, is about HIV/AIDS around the world. [Titled *It’s Not Over*, the film will be available closer to World AIDS Day, December 1, on Netflix, SnagFilms, Pivot and other formats.] The documentary chose three people from different countries who are living with HIV/AIDS, and I was the one chosen from the United States. I also plan to continue to dedicate my life to educating about HIV/AIDS, sharing my story and advocating against bullying.

What do you hope readers take away from your memoir?

I hope that readers take away from my memoir that no one should be bullied for any reason; not because of what they have, what they look like, what they don't have, or anything else. I believe that everyone should be treated the same. Additionally, I want the bullies to take away from my memoir that you don't know how what you say or do is going to affect the person. And by the time you do, it might be too late. Once someone takes their life, then it is too late.

I also hope that people who are living with a chronic illness take away from my memoir that it does not have to define who they are. Just because I was born with HIV doesn't mean that it defines who I am.

A lot of people with HIV struggle with issues of shame and disclosure, yet you've been open about your status for several years now. How has this openness--and writing this memoir--affected your health and your life?
No one should be ashamed of their HIV status. When I found out I was HIV positive, I never thought there was anything wrong with it or that it made me less of a normal person. When I disclosed to my best friend, at the time in sixth grade, I didn't think she was going to think any different of me, but later I found out that people were going to judge me because of it. Because of the bullying I endured, I began to have stress-induced seizures, lost 19 pounds, and my hair began to fall out. Once I stopped attending the middle school the seizures stopped. I believe that everything happens for a reason. If I wouldn't have gone through everything I went through, then I wouldn't be where I am today. Nowadays I could not care less what someone thinks about me with my HIV status. I have realized now that if someone has a problem that I am HIV positive, then they obviously are not someone I need in my life.

Me writing this memoir and telling my story has become a way for me to cope with being HIV positive and the bullying that I have endured. Every time I get up to share my story it's a sort of release for me. To hear that I have inspired others or that I have helped others stand up for what they believe in is what keeps me.

I believe that bullying has become a huge issue in today's society. I think that kids younger and younger are beginning to commit suicide because of the bullying that they have endured. So therefore I felt sharing my story would be a way for me to advocate against bullying.

Can you tell us about someone younger than 30 who was a big influence for you?
I have always looked up to Ryan White. He is another Indiana native who was HIV positive. He had the courage to fight for what he believed in and for the right to go to school before he passed away. He paved the way for me, and because of him I have in turn been able to fight for those who have HIV to be treated right in school.

Finally, why is it important to have young people speaking out about HIV?
When I have gone into schools to share my story, I have noticed that most of the kids or teens don't pay much attention when an adult is educating them about HIV. When I get up to share my story, all of a sudden the kids or teens do pay attention and actually listen to what I am saying. Most kids or teens don't believe that HIV can happen to them. So when I tell them I am HIV

positive, it gets them to think and realize that it can happen to anyone, even them.

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