Part Two: Resolutions and New Beginnings

February 14, 2016 By Christian Kiley

Many people know what it is to work an entry-level position. Hourly wages, indifferent coworkers and unpredictable schedules are common, and more often than not, workers are not privy to the institutional process of making decisions about best practices.

That reality most certainly applies to my current position at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Boston.

I know! I know! You weren't expecting that! You thought I worked at Kids Hangout, Inc.!

But my gift to you, dear reader, as we move forward is to drop the pseudonyms I used in the first part of this story. I feel like I owe you guys at least that -- I respect your intelligence too much to use thinly veiled references to organizations you probably already identified. I respect the intelligence of my readership. Unless you were guessing it was the YMCA. In that case, you're down one. The YMCA serves adults and kids. It's not your fault; everyone misses things. You're probably reading this on a phone. You'd better not be on the toilet. I digress.

When I left you, I was headed downtown to file a claim of discrimination against Mr. Panic, a kind but ill-informed person who, despite good intentions, made the discriminatory decision to pull the event I had dutifully planned for World AIDS Day at the Boys and Girls Club. As you may recall, the aftermath of this unfortunate decision was, for a few weeks, misery. Mostly my own, although many of my coworkers were equally disappointed with what happened. Mr. Panic undermined me in a very public way, and to make matters worse, he never made any effort to reach out to me about his concerns.

It was likely that, if the event were planned by someone else, who was not openly HIV positive, there would have been no issue.

But there was an issue, who was me. Hence the claim.

The young woman at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) office in downtown Boston had a great sense of humor. She tried to keep things light while she prompted me to recount the story. It was surprisingly hard to do. I actually forgot to mention how Mr. Panic asked me to list the co-workers to whom I had disclosed, because by the time I was sitting in her office, I likely appeared as a sparkling ball of anxiety, crackling and wringing my electric hands. It wasn't until I called my husband on my walk back to the T and he asked me how it went that I realized I

had left out this detail.

It didn't matter; the claim was filed. I was informed that my organization would be contacted within 30 days. The wheels of social justice were in motion -- just in time for the holidays.

The club closed for over a week. My husband and I went to Upstate New York to visit family, and we spent some time with family here in Boston. It was a relaxing couple of weeks, and not a moment too soon. I needed a break. It truly was a long December. (Thanks, Counting Crows.)

Upon returning from the holidays, I got an email from my friend, Carl Sciortino, who is also the executive director of AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts.

Carl told me that he had been contacted by a third party on behalf of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Boston, and that they had asked his organization to partner with them. He wanted me to know about his disclosure to them that we had already spoken about the incident (Carl was one of the first people I thought to call, he's a gem) and that he was looking forward to working with me. He congratulated me on starting a meaningful conversation.

Carl's email heralded the great reversal. Within days, I talked it out with my executive director, who had the humility to apologize to me, and the intelligence to urge me to burst into his office as needed with any gripes or misgivings as soon as they pop up. I had great conversations with many of my co-workers about the turn-around. It was made clear that a plan was in motion to re-schedule the event.

On Tuesday, January 12th, I led a staff training on HIV awareness.

Carl and some of his staff attended to listen in and offer their feedback, along with a lovely woman named Megara Bell who runs Partners in Sex Education, an organization that specializes in this sort of programming, and also runs a fantastic program called Positive Educators Reaching Youth (PERY). I hope to write more about my experience with PERY in a later post, but for now, I'll just tip my hat to Megara -- she's doing some of the most important work there is, and doing it quite well.

I showed my co-workers the short documentary I initially planning to screen on Dec. 1. I told them about my own journey -- not just my HIV infection, but the circumstances that led up to it, and those that followed my diagnosis. It's the same talk I've given to high school students for the past couple of years. After the training, some of them thanked me for sharing my personal history -- which, ironically, would have probably put me out of the running if it had been included in the interview process for my job.

Not that any of this was ever a secret. If you Google me, my web series Unsure/Positive is on the first page of the results. It says it right there, in plain English.

(The top result is some other Christian Kiley, who I've Internet stalked a bit. He almost got fired from his job at a public school in California for appearing in a former student's web series. As a drug user. He's a playwright, and a drama teacher, from what I can gather -- it's funny the

parallels between me and my Google search results nemesis. Actually, I think we'd probably be great friends! But I want the top spot. Christian, if you're reading this, send me an email. It's time.)

Yeah.

So by this point, you've probably gathered from my relaxed and tangential banter that things are getting better.

I am no longer a tightly wound anxiety driven pariah. Instead, I'm someone blessed with the opportunity to use my personal narrative as an educational tool, creating awareness about HIV in a community that desperately needs it.

I'm working closely with some of the most respected activists and educators in the Boston area. I'm going to show the teens where I work a documentary intended to reduce the social stigma of HIV, and I'll have the chance to discuss that with them, as well as offer them the opportunity to tell their stories through filmmaking, which is, to put it mildly, my jam.

I'm also going on my honeymoon this week. I'm escaping the cold weather and spending a full week in Curaçao with my incredible husband, who I adore.

I'm starting a new chapter in my life, one full of possibility -- and I'm lucky enough to work for an organization, which is 100% behind me, excepting one man's knee-jerk reaction and subsequent lapse in judgement.

So I'm dropping the discrimination claim. Despite the fact that Mr. Panic never took the time to connect with me. I'm not surprised in the least, as I am just a lowly entry-level employee, and I'm sure he'll maintain that his motivations were professional.

But he doesn't need to worry about me anymore.

I got what I needed, which was respect, and recognition from my peers for standing up for myself. Mr. Panic can have his golf trips, and his wool suits and his board meetings. I'll have my pupils, and my projects, and my integrity. Who could ask for anything more?

I suppose I could ask that people pay more attention to my web series.

I'm unsure if they will -- my marketing and PR budget is a memory -- but I'm positive that if they do, they'll get where I'm coming from. I've sent emails with free links to the show to a lot of other HIV activists, most of whom haven't given me the time of day. Some of them are also bloggers. I hope they're reading this. (I also hope the other Christian Kiley is reading this. I'm really hoping he does.)

Thinking forward, I'm not done talking about this stuff. Or blogging about it, making shows about it -- I'll definitely be promoting Unsure/Positive next time you hear from me. The show is begging for a second season in terms of narrative, and if it finds an audience, it might just go on. My work continues.

But for now, I’d like to wish everyone a Happy New Year. And if you’re living with HIV, I hope you’re able to tell someone new about it this year. If there’s one thing I learned last year, it’s that speaking your truth can lead to understanding in others, and deepen your own understanding of yourself. Be brave, be ruthless, be heard -- and be happy. You’ve got a lot of living to do.

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