Ryan White, 25 Years

April 8, 2015 By Shawn Decker

Ryan White passed to spirit on this day 25 years ago- he was 18 years old, yet in that short time he educated millions of people worldwide about how HIV was and wasn't transmitted. Born with hemophilia, Ryan contracted HIV through his blood product treatments in the 1980s, when screening methods were haphazard at best. After being kicked out of his school, he and his mother waged a very serious and public campaign against HIV and ignorance.

(read my 2010 article on Ryan for POZ.)

Ryan, to put it bluntly, was a rockstar.

I know the impact he had on my family- my mom saw him as a third son of sorts, following his medical ups and downs in the media. I emotionally distanced myself from him when he was alive, mainly because his story hit a little too close to home for me... hemophilia, HIV, getting kicked out of school- I never thought I would go public with the kind of details that he never blinked an eye in sharing.

At 20, when I found my own educational voice, I allowed myself to feel that connection with Ryan White that was always there. I was immensely proud of the path that Ryan had paved- and saw the need, six years after he passed, for the work to continue. It sounds kooky, and a lot of factors play into these kinds of things, but I give him a nod and a fistbump for introducing me to Gwenn, my partner of 16 years now. We met at a talk given by his mother in 1998... I always think Ryan somehow positioned us to be there, standing in line waiting to talk to his mom, close enough to notice one another...

Of course, my personal life would never be the same. And my proudest- and most effective- work as an educator has been with Gwenn, standing together as a couple in a healthy relationship.

Thanks, Ryan. You are never forgotten.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

(Read my Positoid column, "Do the White Thing", from the January 1998 issue of POZ.)

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