The Big O

October 26, 2006 By Regan Hofmann

Well, it's been a while since I've blogged. Things have been a bit crazy since the International AIDS Conference in Toronto. I'll fill you in soon. But for today...breaking news. Marvelyn and I were on The Oprah Winfrey Show today at 4 E.S.T. In fact, Marvelyn and I just blew back in from the windy city last night. We're still recovering from our plane ride with 100 mile an hour tail winds and a landing at Newark that had me reaffirming my faith as we bounced through the skies over Staten Island.

It was an honor and a trip to be on Oprah. They're just not words you imagine hearing: "We'd like to invite you to be a guest on The Oprah Winfrey Show." But there we were, holed up in the sumptuous Omni hotel, reading Ms. Winfrey's magazine, wondering what the show would turn out to be.

We knew that there would be a total of 6 women living with HIV who would be featured, including me and Marvelyn, Cherrel Edwards, Chelsea Gulden, Precious Jackson, and Evette Olgetree, as well as Magic Johnson and his wife, Cookie; Dr. Kim Smith; Eugene Rivers, reverend at the Azusa Christian Church and Julie Gerberding, director of the CDC. The focus? HIV/AIDS in America and the rising infection rate among women, particularly women of color.

Given the reach of Oprah's show and knowing that her previous shows have focused on the phenomenon of the "down low" and AIDS orphans in Africa, I was thrilled to see her focus a show on the epidemic stateside. Throughout this year of disclosure, I have encountered so many people who really feel that AIDS is no longer a problem in the U.S. Given the media's focus on the pandemic's path of destruction overseas, it's important that we remind people that we have, as Magic Johnson said on the show "Our own little Africa" right here in the US.

It's a sentiment I felt strongly a week ago when I was in Washington, DC for a fundraiser for Youth AIDS. I was seated at a table with a group of people all committed to supporting the cause of AIDS relief..."over there." When I told them that the HIV infection rate in the District of Columbia was 1 in 20, they said they didn't believe me. They said that AIDS was "under control here" and that "people in the U.S. had access to medicine to stay well." They said that very few people got AIDS in America anymore. I nearly choked on my salmon. When I recovered - I mean, these were people who'd paid a great deal of money to support a local AIDS charity...if this is what they thought...what was the rest of the country thinking? - I decided it was time to drop the bomb. So, I told the well-dressed, black-tied folks at my table that 2 of us (Marvelyn was sitting beside me) at the dinner table were positive. Given that there were only 10 people at the table - I pointed out that the rate of infection at our table was twice as bad as that of the District of Columbia. Two women stood up and went to the ladies' room. The others just kind of stared at us.

I find it so incredible that people are incredulous when I tell them I am HIV positive. So often, I get a slack jawed stare. Sometimes people actively question whether I'm telling the truth. Sometimes they say they believe me, but I can tell they're struggling to digest the news.

This is the point. This is the reason I decided to put my mug out there - on the cover and pages of POZ - and in the national media. Too many people still don't think it can happen to them. Often, when I share my status, I think people spend the first minutes trying to establish how I am different from them - as if the more they can differentiate themselves from me, the lower their chances will be of also having HIV. I think they spend the next short while after that, reviewing the details of their sex life and wondering whether or not they could have been exposed to the virus.

When the producer of Oprah's show called to ask if I had any special requests for my trip, I said that I would like, if possible, a window seat on the airplane, over the wing. I told her I was terrified to fly. She said, "You are afraid to get on an airplane, but you're not afraid to go on national TV and tell the world you have HIV and talk about living with the virus?" And I said that I wasn't in control of the plane, and that no one would be helped by my flying through the sky in a big metal tube. But, that when I put my face on the boob tube, I raised my chances of getting to women (and men) and convincing them that even if they've had unprotected sex once, they may have been exposed to HIV and should be tested - and use protection going forward. I said I was afraid to die in a plane (as irrational as that sounds given the odds). But I was confident that I might save a few lives by going on TV. And even if one person believed what we said on the show - a single life saved would be worth the terror of appearing on national TV.

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