This Teenage Couple Will School You Now

November 13, 2014 By Mark S. King

When Chanse, a 19-year-old gay man living in Shreveport, Louisiana, tested HIV positive a few months ago, his mother reacted with understandable emotion and concern. And then she did something both odd and beautiful: she threw Chanse a coming out party.

“We had a couple of dozen family members and friends there,” Chanse told me during my recent visit to my hometown. “And halfway through the party we started pinning red ribbons on everyone. They didn’t know what to make of it.”

His mother then called the group to attention and said she had an important announcement to make. “She wanted everyone to know that something had happened and I would need their support,” he said. “And then she told them that I had tested positive and that she loves me.”

The response from the party attendees was immediate and moving. There were tears, yes, but they also congratulated Chanse for taking charge of his health and starting treatment. Since then, several family members have begun to volunteer for **The Philadelphia Center**, the local HIV services agency where Chanse was tested and participates in ongoing wellness programs.

HIV continues to devastate the South with alarming infection rates. One might assume that in the most stubborn of Red States, gay men have lives of rejection and misery, that they are apathetic about HIV, that they are ignorant about seeking treatment or accessing prevention strategies such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), or that living as a gay teenager brings so many challenges that HIV falls far down the ladder of priorities.

That is clearly not the case for Chanse or for his boyfriend Josh, also 19 years old, who both swept into action when Chanse tested positive and, in another room of the agency, Josh learned he was HIV negative.

“I told him right away that I wouldn’t leave him,” said Josh. “We cried in the hallways for a few minutes, and then we both wanted to know right away what to do about it. One of the men at the agency, Eric Evans, told me about PrEP. I did some research and knew I wanted to start taking it.”

I am certainly guilty of making assumptions about the engagement of young gay men in the South. Having grown up in Shreveport, I assigned the same prejudices to the community that I endured when I came bursting out of the closet as a teenager in 1978. But Chanse and Josh were quick to correct my outdated notions.

“We have plenty of friends,” Chanse told me. “And we walk down the street holding hands. I can’t speak for everyone, but it just hasn’t been a problem for us.”

Josh has been on PrEP for a month now, and his own choices defy nearly every contention made by critics of the prevention strategy. He is compliant, takes his daily pill on schedule, and hasn’t missed a dose yet. He takes the medication within the context of a committed relationship, not as a license for promiscuity. And taking the prevention measure hasn’t meant abandoning condoms.

“Why would we stop using condoms?” Josh asked. “I know Chanse will be undetectable soon since he just started treatment, and I know PrEP is protecting me. But we’re also in the habit of using condoms every time. If we don’t have them, then we do something else. It’s just what makes us both comfortable, and we’re going to keep doing things the same way we always have.”

As a middle-aged HIV activist, I thought I had an understanding of what it means to be gay in Louisiana and the level of commitment among young gay men.

But I was wrong. I just got schooled by two teenagers.

Mark

(I wish to thank the very good people of **Allied Media Productions** in Shreveport, Louisiana, for sharing this interview clip with me. They are real public servants, producing video content for agencies like **The Philadelphia Center** and **The Deaf Action Center**.)

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