Today is National Gay Men's HIV/AIDS Awareness Day

September 27, 2009 By Regan Hofmann

First, I want to pay tribute to all the gay men we have lost to this disease, many of whom are responsible for the fact that many of us are alive today. I never had the honor of meeting some of the gay men who were legendary HIV activists and community leaders, doctors, health care workers, research scientists, nurses, government workers, lawyers, politicians and just wonderful people unaffiliated with the community. But as a woman openly living with HIV, I am deeply indebted to all of them for what they did and wish to honor them today.

On this day of national awareness specifically for gay men, all of us living with and affected by HIV/AIDS should take a moment to remind our friends, families, neighbors and acquaintances to know their HIV status by getting tested. Early detection can increase your chances of survival! Yes, it's scary to get tested for HIV, but isn't it scarier to think you might be living with a disease that can be deadly if left untreated and that can be survived, if fought with treatment?

As a straight woman, I don't know what it feels like to be gay. But as a person living with HIV who has battled the stigma around the disease for years, I have an inkling of what it feels like to be marginalized by society (hint: not good). While each circumstance that makes someone feel tossed to the edges of normalcy differs, and the experience is different for each person each time, there are some universal truths shared by all people who fight for their civil rights, their human rights and their dignity. Which is why I plan to go to the HIV/AIDS Rally on the Ellipse in front of the White House on the evening of Saturday, October 10th--and why I will stay for the National Equality March the following day.

Yesterday, I attended the commitment ceremony for Marjorie Hill, executive director of the Gay Men's Health Crisis, and Stacey Bridgeman, Marjorie's long time partner. It was a beautiful ceremony and at the end, Marjorie and Stacey held hands and jumped the broom. I had heard of the tradition that is common at African American weddings, but had never been present to watch two people leap into the air over the broom--defying society's desire to keep some people from the love they deserve to openly share.

For those of you unfamiliar with the tradition, here is an explanatory excerpt from Marjorie and Stacey's wedding program:

"This tradition [of jumping the broom] stems back to the time when our slave ancestors were prevented from marrying. They developed this community ritual as a way to show that a couple was united and to indicate their desire to make a home together. As it was with our ancestors brought to America in bondage, our years of love and commitment will not be recognized by society at large. We jump the broom in recognition of our slave ancestors who not only believed in love, but also believed in freedom. We jump in defiance of unjust and un-holy laws that would deny our right to be together!"

It amazes me that society continues to fail to see the link between intolerance and suffering. All people who sit in righteous judgement of others must be reminded that their act of judging hurts and sometimes even kills other people and that is not noble, no matter what the reason, belief or justification for their judgement. Homophobia makes it difficult for people to not only live the lives they have every right to live, but it also, in the case of HIV/AIDS aids and abets (pardon the pun) the ability of the virus to kill more people. When people fear coming forward for any reason they are less likely to gain the medical knowledge and care that can save their lives. So, for anyone who is homophobic, consider this: is it right to keep another human being from good health because of your personal belief or particular view of the world? I happen to think not. And I think that anyone whose belief causes others physical and emotional harm should not feel smug sitting in judgement of others.

This was a crazy, hectic week (we shipped the November issue of POZ to the printer, my book came out, I attended the General Assembly Meeting at the United Nations and the National Minority AIDS Council's benefit "An Evening Without Politics"). I was exhausted by Saturday. But I am so grateful for finding the energy to be present when Marjorie and Stacey shared their vows and made their leap of faith. My wish for the world on this day is one of greater acceptance and openness and I hope that all people, especially, today, gay men, find a way to lively freely and in good health, despite some people's desire to keep you from that to which you are entitled.

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