TURNING THE TIDE

July 3, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

It?s not always easy being an AIDS activist and journalist. My mornings all too often begin with my reading nasty news from around the world of discriminatory actions towards people living with HIV, tales of positive people unable to get care or people so overcome by fear of disclosure that they don?t access the emotional support and medical help that they need. Every day, the POZ staff scours the global headlines, looking for news of AIDS, hoping that it?s good, braced for the fact that most of the time, it?s not. My favorite one this morning is about drug addicts in South Africa stealing Sustiva (efavirenz) from HIV-positive people, crushing up the med and mixing it with marijuana to intensify their high. Talk about off label use?

From news of budget cuts for AIDS services to reports of new laws that perpetuate outdated views towards people living with HIV to the intersection of natural disaster, extreme weather and a plague that clearly seems irrepressible despite its treatable and preventable nature, it?s hard sometimes to even imagine what the good news about AIDS would be, even if the worldwide press deigned to publish it. (Well, I do dream daily of one headline: AIDS Cure Found.)

But then there are those occasional days when we hear a piece of bright news about AIDS and I know that the community who continues to fight against the tsunami of ignorance, fear and misinformation is beginning to turn the tide. Even more exciting is when POZ has played a role in the sea change.

Yesterday was one of those days.

Wednesday, we learned that Caleb Glover, the three-year-old tot who graced the April 2008 cover of POZ with Project Runway Star Jack Mackenroth and had been banned from a public swimming pool in Alabama because of his HIV-positive status, got to be the first one into the newly christened pool at Camp Heartland (now One Heartland) in Willow River, Minnesota?a summer camp for children living with HIV.

We'd all met Caleb and his family when they visited us at POZ. Caleb, who was born with HIV and cerebral palsy, just lost his adopted dad, Dick (a warm and delightful man who was also featured in the story in April POZ), and Caleb's been through a bout of health concerns himself. So, yesterday when POZ staffer Michael Halliday asked me if I'd heard the news about Caleb and his adoptive mother, Silvia, I was worried. But then he told me that it was good news...and I was thrilled to hear that Caleb and Silvia were with the wonderful folks at Heartland, taking a celebratory dip in a sparkling new pool. (Caleb and Silvia were invited to One Heartland by the camp?s founder and CEO, Neil Willenson, an extraordinary man who's been caring for HIV-positive kids and their families for 15 years.)

After Caleb's story first broke, we followed up on the national news coverage and did what we could not to let this terrible act of discrimination go unnoticed. As a result of all of the coverage, Caleb has become a modern emblem for the rights of all positive people.

Click here to read the story of Caleb at One Heartland.

Here's the video of Silvia and Caleb:

Click here to read our special report about Caleb.

Click here to read our feature story about Caleb.

Click here to read my editor?s letter about Caleb.

Another HIV-related story that brings good news is our cover story for our newly posted July/August issue. It features Jeremiah Johnson, a Peace Corps volunteer who was sent home from his post in the Ukraine by the Peace Corps when they discovered that he was HIV positive.

We first heard about Jeremiah and his plight to charge the Peace Corps with discrimination in a small story in a Denver newspaper. We followed up with Jeremiah and he shared his inside story with us. In response to many in the community who wrote letters of protest to the Peace Corps, the efforts of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and pressure applied by the press (including our story), the Peace Corps has made a public statement claiming that they have changed their policy towards HIV-positive Peace Corps applicants and volunteers.

Click here to read the Jeremiah Johnson story. It was also posted on the ACLU website.

A few weeks ago, on the day we were going to press with the July/August issue, POZ's Deputy Editor Bob Ickes walked into my office and asked whether I'd heard the latest about Jeremiah. I asked him to tell me and he read, with a big grin on his face, the email from the Peace Corps stating that they had reconsidered their policy towards HIV-positive people.

Good news like this makes all the other days of delving into bad news worth it. And it is an honor and a privilege to be part of a community that keeps the veritable tidal wave of bad news at bay by celebrating HIV-positive heroes like Caleb and Jeremiah. Their courage defies the wave of darkness that threatens to surround this disease but that ultimately cannot.

Happy Fourth of July. I hope all you HIV-positive folks go for a swim in Caleb's honor...and think of Jeremiah when you're feeling proud to be an American!

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