# What We're Up Against

September 16, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

There are days when I feel like we are making headway in our efforts to remove the stigma and deadly misperceptions surrounding HIV/AIDS. Days when I believe we can get the world to treat those of us living with the virus with the compassion, understanding and support we deserve. Days when I have seen the power of education and the stories and presence of people with HIV/AIDS alter people's attitudes towards people living with HIV so that those who once feared, reviled and dismissed people with HIV take them in their arms.

I have to believe this change is possible on a global scale, or I would give up. And I do believe it.

But then there are days like today when I am acutely reminded of what we are up against.

I am talking about San Francisco County sheriff John McGinness, who, according to the Sacramento Bee, recently said, "Issuing condoms [to Sacramento County jail inmates] for illegal sex would be a little like issuing 'cocktail glasses, margarita blenders and roach clips' to the incarcerated." (Read the whole story here.)

I am thinking of Christine O'Donnell, the newly elected Republican Senatorial candidate from the state of Delaware who argued on CNN in 1997 that we spend too much money preventing and treating HIV/AIDS. (I would be curious to know her current position on the issue.)

And I am thinking of Pope Benedict XVI, who is headed to England for a state visit tomorrow, and whose opposition of the distribution of condoms and how it has contributed to the spread of AIDS as well as the Vatican's stance on gay rights and abortion have led a large list of influential people to sign a letter (read it here) to the *Guardian* newspaper arguing that the pope should not be granted the "honour" of a state visit. Read the whole story here.

Ignorance and unwillingness to think differently about HIV/AIDS among people in positions like these can lead to the deaths of HIV-positive people. And it helps spread the disease.

What can we do?

Stand up, over and over again, to confront the ignorance, fear and misinformation.

But it is so hard. And it takes such bravery. Something an HIV-positive man named Mike Sisco had in spades. Living with HIV in the small town of Williamson, West Virginia, he jumped into a swimming pool and people ran screaming from the water. After the incident, in 1987, he appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to try to fight AIDS stigma. Oprah visited with his community, day lighting just how debilitating stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS can be. It is absolutely terrifying and

heart wrenching to see how misinformed people treated Sisco. And the bravery with which he stood before them, admitting that their accusations that he was licking the fruit in his local grocery store, the news that his family would not allow him to be buried in the family plot and the constant public ridicule in the local press led him to near suicide--was equally stunning.

Oprah went back to Williamson to take the temperature and see if there had been any demonstrable change in people's attitudes towards HIV/AIDS. The coverage of her return journey aired yesterday. You can watch the clip of the original interview with Sisco and read the coverage on her website and judge for yourself.

As a person living with HIV, I would say that while many people are perhaps more politically correct when responding to people living with HIV today, the underlying fear and judgment of HIV-positive people remains largely prevalent.

There are many exceptions. Many people who are compassionate and well-educated and love us and support us and treat us medically and stand beside us bravely.

But unfortunately, there are still far too many who aren't in that camp.

Stigma and misinformation kill just as surely as the virus. Because it makes people afraid to know their status, and, if they're positive, afraid to access the care and support they need to stay alive. People who don't know their status or who know but cannot face it and live in denial are not only more likely to get sick and die, they are also more likely to spread HIV. So, ironically, while the likes of McGuinness, O'Donnell, some of the folks in Williamson and the Pope believe they are righteously saving lives, they are actually increasing the chances of ending them.

Sisco did not kill himself. Instead, he found the strength to subject himself to more scrutiny in order to save others' lives. He passed away in 1994. He is one of 25 million people who we have laid to rest, in part, because of ongoing ignorance, unnecessary fear and vindictive judgment by people. People who likely (with perhaps the exception of the Pope) have had sex just like many of those of us who contracted HIV that way. People who may have even had unprotected sex. Self-anointed moral superiority--or even that allegedly bestowed on a person by a higher power--is no protection against a virus. People who contracted HIV made the same choice as those who do not contract HIV. Nearly everyone (including some in the Catholic church who have sworn not to) has sex at some point. That some people have sex and get HIV and some don't is a matter of biological factors and odds. It is not the result of being morally bereft.

I want to thank Oprah for helping shine a light on the fact that when it comes to the deadly stigma surrounding HIV, we have indeed come a ways, but we still have a long way to go.

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