Meet the Woman Who Opened Her Arms and Saved My Life

As we celebrate Women's History Month, I look back on the first person to hear me say, "I have HIV."

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This Woman's Work

When you look through the archived images of the early HIV movement, often the images you see are men. Yet women have been there from the beginning and continue to be contributors to the fight against this disease. In my work with HIV, it is the face of women who stand shoulder to shoulder with men on the battle lines. And on a personal level, when it comes to living day to day, it has been a woman who has made the battle less lonely. In fact, it was a woman whom I felt comfortable enough with to reveal not only that I was gay but also that I had HIV. As the country celebrates National Women's History Month, I want to reflect on a woman who has affected my life as a gay man living with HIV.

The first person I told I was HIV positive was my best friend Tracy. I was friends with her before she was friends with me. We met in high school. Although she was a grade higher, there was something about her that made me want to know her. I can't say she had the best first impression of me. She will share that she saw me as an annoying freshman and tried her best to never cross my path, yet somehow I finally squirmed my way into her life.

We had so many good times and laughs together as teens. One fun memory was that whenever we went to a restaurant we'd tell the waiter it was our birthday. This often guaranteed us a free dessert. We'd say it, knowing it was a lie, even when it was neither of our birthdays. I remember a visit to a Mexican restaurant and sharing our lie. After dinner, they came out with a whole mariachi band and a small cake on fire. As the whole restaurant sang "Happy Birthday" the restaurant staff circled us and sat a sombrero on Tracy's head. I still see her embarrassed face underneath that hat. We decided ice cream wasn't worth that much attention, so never did it again. But we had more Bonnie and Clyde tricks up our sleeves as we ventured into our teen world.

Soon after graduating high school, I learned I was HIV positive. I was crushed and felt my life was over. The worst is that I couldn't tell anyone as that would mean I also would have to let them know I was gay. It was a secret I couldn't even share with Tracy. Without knowing the depth of our relationship, no one can understand why this was a hard secret to keep from her. We shared

everything together. Early on when I was rejected by my mother and soon my family, Tracy took me in and made me feel wanted, as if my life did count.

Living on my own, I now had four walls surrounding the pain I was in and no one to see it. There were many moments sitting in the dark wondering what this thing called HIV was doing in my body. I pulled back from everyone, even life, as I went into a serious depression. Tracy, knowing I was in pain, always opened the door for me to share but I was scared to walk through that door. What if she rejected me as well and then I had no one? That was my greatest fear. Being alone.

My turning point came when I tried to take my own life. The attempt was not well thought out as I took a bottle of aspirins and called 911 on myself. The doctors saw the call for help I was going through and advised therapy. Again this was something I was not willing to do based on having to disclose why I took the pills in the first place. After a week of more crying, there was something in me telling me to snap out of it. I caught a look at myself in the mirror and saw an unrecognizable face. This was not me. I needed help.

I remember walking out of my house toward Tracy's house. She lived several miles away but instead of using public transportation I decided to walk. I also decided I was no longer going to hold onto this secret. That I was going to take a risk and tell someone. The load was too great for me to bear.

As I got closer to her house I had an internal debate in my head, asking whether was I doing the right thing. I knew that once my secret was out, it was out for good. Before I could counter that reasoning, my finger made the decision and rang her doorbell. As I entered her house, she immediately saw the pain on my face. The pain I was once good at hiding. Asking me what was wrong, she put her arms around me. Once she made contact, the wall I had around me came down and an ocean of tears followed.

"I have HIV."

She didn't say anything but held me tight, as if I were a child. I felt a release in her arms as I was able to unload the weight of my secret. And I'll never forget her next words. Not "I'm sorry" or "How could you?" or any other questions requiring an answer. She simply told me.

"I love you no matter what you have or who you are."

That statement restored my life. It made me feel whole again. Valued. It let me know that despite having HIV, I still mattered. That being gay was not the curse that would drive a loved one away but that it could be the cause that drove a person to hold me tighter.

Thirty-something years later I am fortunate to have her as my best friend. She gave a gift that allowed me to love myself and embrace not only my status but also my sexuality. I will never forget her gift. And as I hear other HIV stories, it's stories of women who are often the first to know. Women who stand with open arms. This is not to say it's the only contributions women have made to HIV as they are leaders on so many levels. But on a personal level, they are also life-

savers who give the gift of unconditional love. So on this month of honoring women, it’s only appropriate that I honor my friend not because she’s a woman but a wonderful soul.

Thank you Tracy.

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