

Seeing HIV In A New Light: Sharing Our Stories Builds Community

By Rodger Brooks

Many of us who survived the first wave of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and are now living meaningful, productive lives, indeed even thriving, can be role models for younger and more recently diagnosed persons. Having learned how to cope with the many manifestations of HIV and the often-debilitating side effects that treatment sometimes brings, we are in a position to share a wealth of accumulated experience and knowledge and hopefully provide those newly infected with hope and inspiration.

For me personally, it has been important to remind others about the challenges that my generation of PLWA (people living with AIDS) faced and how oppression and discrimination greatly compounded our struggle to survive. Those of us who are left can give witness to the challenges we as gay men with HIV/AIDS faced during the early years. Many of us were ostracized – abandoned by our family and friends, victims of discrimination, not only in the work place, but also in the larger social milieu within which we were struggling to survive (sadly that often included the Queer community itself).

San Francisco Bay Area residents, Queers in particular, take pride in our commitment to diversity, yet few of us move

outside our self-segregating social circles to associate with those who are not reflections of our own identities. The face of AIDS in our little part of the world has changed from being mostly gay men to include an increasing number of women of color, transsexuals, IV drug users and those in recovery. Whole families are now part of our HIV fabric. For many of us gay men living with HIV/AIDS it is rare that we have the opportunity for genuine connection with other poz people from various segments of the broader community. The experiences and stories of these “other” HIV folks can provide us “Lazarus” survivors with hope; we may take pride in knowing that, partly as a result of our efforts, they will most likely never have to go through the hell that we experienced. Still, it is critical for us to comprehend the particular challenges of the current generation of those most impacted by HIV/AIDS, not only to better assist them in their struggles, but also to glean fresh insights from their experiences and to learn from them how to lead richer, more meaningful lives. They too serve as our role models and teachers.

It is also my strong feeling that we as survivors have the responsibility to not only share the pain of our past, but to also own up to our whole story. This

bigger story includes other people locally and globally, and relative to both the past and the present HIV pandemic. We also must acknowledge that despite the hardships that we faced, we have been relatively privileged. Most of us Queer men with HIV/AIDS (those of us who are still alive as well as those of us who did not survive), have by and large had access to first class medical care. And our financial and emotional burdens have been somewhat less than the Black women both in the U.S. and globally who are facing the challenges of raising children while living with HIV, children who may themselves be infected.

I have had the opportunity to share thoughts and experiences with many of these women. Their courage and seemingly boundless capacity to endure, their demonstration of sisterhood, their capacity to experience joy even in the face of the persecution, misogyny, victimization and sometimes outright bondage they confront has been inspiring for me, as I expect that it would be for all people.

Recently at a retreat sponsored by the group AIDS, Medicine and Miracles, I had the pleasure to spend some time with a woman living with HIV who as

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a girl growing up in a traditional tribal society in Zimbabwe, was forced into marriage in exchange for some goats. Somehow she managed to escape. Through sheer determination in the face of ostracism both in her native community and subsequently in an expatriate community in London where she was stigmatized for her HIV status, she has survived. Today she lives in the East Bay, where one of her daughters has a graduate degree from UC Berkley. Hearing her story was inspirational and helped me see myself, my world and my own history of struggling and thriving with HIV in a new light. If hers is not a profile in courage, what is? There are miracles to be had by sharing our collective inspirational stories, and in the face of such nobility putting aside the “petty” differences that so often keeps us apart.

To the extent that we can practice sincere empathy and relate genuinely to one another, PWLAs may serve as models for the LGBTI community, often rife with stereotypes about various categories of people, and in turn, for the society as a whole.

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