



David Badders/DN

HIV

Former UNL

By Stacey McKenzie

It takes guts to reveal you're gay, and it takes even more to reveal you have the virus that causes AIDS.

Rodney A. Bell II hasn't cloaked his sexuality for 10 years. But in 1990, positive results from his HIV test forced him into a lonely privacy and shrank all that was significant in his life.

Friends called less.

Anxiety-free hours were few.

Income plunged until government aid became his only source. And freedoms were taken away.

Most significantly, the number of Rodney's T-4 cells, which help the body fight off infection, dropped from 1,280 in 1990 to 500 in 1991 and now to 368.

At the same time, anxiety and anger began to escalate.

A new courage and confidence also grew, Rodney says, making him take new risks, such as allowing his name to be used in this article.

Even though it will create new dangers in his life, Rodney says he wants his name in the article because he likes things out in the open.

"I like to be out of the so-called closet on everything."

The 30-year-old is quite familiar with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He came to UNL in 1983 and graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science in 1987.

During his university years, Rodney fought for equal rights for gays, lesbians and bisexuals and served as president of the Gay/Lesbian Student Association from 1985-1987. He was an advocate for Student Condom Day, started a GLSA resource center in the Nebraska Union, created several programs and fund-raisers and received the Sue Tidball Award for Creative Humanity in 1986 for building bridges between the gay and lesbian community and the heterosexual community.

Following graduation, he was chairman of the GLSA Alumni Association and worked for the Lancaster Office of Mental Retardation. He then was a case-worker at the Nebraska Department of Social Services and took classes toward a master's degree in educational psychology with the intention of being a counselor.

But all of this was halted by the virus. In March of 1990 Rodney decided to get tested for HIV. He also had been tested in 1989.

"I just did it as kind of a measure because, I don't know, everybody had been sexual up until that point — extremely sexual."

Even in 1989, Rodney says, there wasn't a whole lot of concern or caution when it came to sex.

"I really don't believe there is now, in Nebraska."



"There are so few people who understand what it is like to have a virus that you can't control, emotions that you can't control because sometimes you are so upset, panicky or depressed or anxious."

— Rodney A. Bell II, UNL alumnus

teaches strength

student learns hard lessons while trying to cope with having HIV

Caution hasn't increased even though AIDS education has, he says, because many people don't realize the circumstances that can lead to infection.

"Most people acquire HIV sexually through a lack of thinking at the time. They get over-involved sexually. That's why I think it's important that heterosexual men wake up."

Even the gay community needs to wake up, Rodney says.

"I don't think there is a fear (of HIV) among people who need an anonymous setting, like the Capitol or some of the parks or campus cruising areas. I'd say that about half of the people probably plain just don't care."

And Rodney says, in some ways, he also thought he just wouldn't get HIV.

"I used condoms for the most part," he says. But, he explained, "If you're feeling low — and being gay is rough enough, you do things like alcohol, and alcohol inhibits your sensibility."

"But after you know that you have the virus, and you know that you have to scratch out people in your phone book and put deceased or whatever, you start realizing how real and human you are."

Rodney sighs, pauses and then describes what went through his mind when he was diagnosed HIV positive: "It is just psychologically stunning and it creates a feeling of numbness. It goes through stages of acceptance. Sometimes, you forget that you are, you have a day at least that you can forget that you are. And it's so nice."

But most of the days that followed Rodney's diagnosis were not nice. They were filled with anxiety and depression — four months of depression, staying away from people and staying inside his apartment.

Rodney had stopped trusting people. "You try to, but you get stung," he says. "It's like a closet, see, that you come out of. You tell one person and it just has a chain effect. . . . I think it's a way of being nosy. It's just not really for any purpose of compassion."

Because it seemed that fewer people cared about him, Rodney started to care less about himself.

"There are psychological manifestations in dealing with the virus. Depression. You don't want to eat. You develop an attitude of 'Who cares?'"

Not caring meant not working. Rodney quit his job and supported himself with Supplementary Security Income of about \$427 a month.

"Some people work longer during the AIDS symptoms. Some people are unable, psychologically."

The psychological distress was worse than the physical distress, Rodney says. Anger and sadness were the prevailing feelings, but the depression and even suicidal feelings could be overwhelming.

"Suicide is not a far, distant thought," he says. "For me, it's a thought process. Some people make plans. I don't make plans. I just feel that way."

After the heavy depression subsided a

bit, Rodney says, he learned to do whatever it took to make him feel comfortable.

Help came in the form of inspirational tapes such as "Your Inner Child" and "Music That Disappears," daily meditation, phone calls and visits, hugs, communication with other HIV-positive people, anti-depression medication, counselors and psychiatrists.

"I used to wake up in the morning, scared as hell, crying and calling up the psychiatrist at UNL," he says. "So, (the psychiatrist) helped me eventually."

A normal day included sleeping late, at least until noon. He also smoked and drank and didn't care much about what he ate, even though he knew a healthy diet could help fight HIV.

"After you test positive you start thinking, 'What's there to live for? Who cares? You're going to die anyway."

"So you get in kind of this fog and you don't know what to do so the problems you get into are. . . self-defeating behaviors, same idea as suicidal, and it really is sort of suicidal because you get punished.

For a while, Rodney's self-defeating behavior got out of control. "I got to a point where I was drinking, I drank a whole bunch one night and my best friend, who is like a brother, basically — dumped me. So I ended up in this neighborhood and I don't remember everything that happened. But I was in jail for disturbing the peace."

As more and more of Rodney's T-4 cells stopped fighting infection, he started rebelling against society. Finally, he jeopardized his freedom and it was taken away.

On Feb. 14, Rodney was sentenced to two years of confinement under the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services for attempted burglary and second-degree forgery.

In September, Rodney found a book bag on the UNL campus. The book bag had, among other things, a checkbook in it. Rodney wrote out several of the checks and forged the signature on them.

At the time, there was nothing to lose by writing the checks, Rodney says. "In my mind, I thought I was going to die anyway, so it didn't matter."

The attempted burglary also occurred in September. Rodney broke into a Lincoln thrift store. Someone spotted him crawling into the store window and called the police, who found him there.

Because he had to cover a check he had previously written, Rodney says, he broke into the store to find something to sell.

"It was irrational but at the same time overpowering." The offenses were just part of what Rodney calls "the psychosocial considerations of being HIV-positive."

Rodney alluded to his charges in an interview before his sentencing.

"Some people get in trouble, for example, a young man is an alcoholic, he goes through the psychological effects of finding out (he has the virus), illegal activity, aggressive behavior — things that aren't like the character that person was."

Rodney says having HIV does not justify his criminal behavior.

"I don't know. I think a lot of it is, at least the people I know of, they have a lot more support. A lot of them have family that care. They're not financially deprived."

Family never makes the top of Rodney's support list because Rodney's family is one of the tougher things he's had to deal with in his life.

Rodney says he is "an adult child of an alcoholic and from a dysfunctional family." Also, one of Rodney's brothers committed suicide in the mid-1980s.

So even when it comes to family members, Rodney has had to be selective about who he told about his HIV diagnosis.

"Some family you don't tell," he said before his sentencing. Ideally, Rodney says, he would like to put out a newsletter of sorts, explaining to all of his family that he has HIV. But, he says, some family just wouldn't be able to handle the news. Rodney's mother has known for a year that he has HIV.

"She's better than me in terms of her mental health. I'm surprised. I thought it was biochemical in some ways."

None of his siblings know.

And his father and grandmother didn't know.

But since going to prison, Rodney has written long letters to his father and grandmother, telling both that he has HIV.

He wrote in the letter to his grandmother, "Don't tell me that it's God's punishment. A true Christian loves people."

Rodney's father knew Rodney was gay, but when he learned from the letter that Rodney had HIV, he stopped taking phone calls from him.

Even more frustrating, Rodney says, is that family and friends who knew he was HIV positive before he went to prison have shut down communication. Part of the reason for this, he says, may be the stigma associated with prison visits.

"Some of my friends won't come because they have to fill out that much personal information. Some people don't like the idea of visiting a place with locked doors. You lose a lot of friends."

Rodney has had only two visitors since he was sentenced. So he tries to get support through the mail.

But, he says, "People just aren't writing me."

"There's a lot of isolation right now, people putting the freeze on me. But I'm finding support in my own creative ways."

Rodney spends much of his lock-down time, or time confined to his cell, writing requests to the prison warden to create HIV/AIDS and gay support groups and to distribute condoms.

There is a need for these things, he says, because he's heard that there are 25-30 inmates with HIV in the Lincoln Correctional Center.

"It's just not fair that you have no control. That's the hardest part of going

in here."

To keep his mind occupied Rodney fills his days by dreaming, thinking about concerns other than HIV, studying legal material, writing in his journal and "putting up with a shitty counselor . . ." he said.

"I was honest with the (prison) counselor, I told her that I didn't think she and I hit it off."

"There's no way she could understand me because she's not in my body, she doesn't understand my emotions. And there is no one on my unit that I'm aware of that I could talk to about HIV."

And, he says, "there are so few people who understand what it is like to have a virus that you can't control, emotions that you can't control because sometimes you are so upset, panicky or depressed or anxious. And it's even worse in (prison) because you have no one to talk to."

Some inmates have questioned Rodney about what his medication is for.

"I tell them, 'Well, depression, anxiety . . . a vitamin, to help me sleep. . . ."

Even with the successful put-offs about his medication, Rodney says, he still fears some of the other inmates.

"They tease me episodically about being gay in roundabout ways like 'tinkerbell' and 'pinky' and all these stupid names. So I respond, 'Well, what (name) am I going to call you?'"

"Before all this letter writing that I did, an inmate sprayed window cleaner on my food. So I told the guard. That can be dangerous too because you're seen as a nark."

But Rodney calls his prison time "just part of my higher education."

"I think that's a healthy way to look at it."

"The biggest lesson of all is that I'm in here to get out of here."

And when he does get out, Rodney says, he will go to Kansas City, which has become his Mecca.

Rodney has been given hope by a man living in Leavenworth, Kan., which is about 30 minutes outside of Kansas City. The man, who responded to an advertisement for friends placed by Rodney, has offered Rodney a job and a place to stay once he gets out of prison.

"I told him that I was HIV positive so that he doesn't get sexually excited."

Before getting the virus, Rodney made about 10 trips a year to Kansas City and for the past two years has attended the annual Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade and Picnic.

This year's parade will be on June 22. Rodney says he is hopeful of getting parole or being put in community custody, which both would allow him more freedom.

"I may or I may not be there. I think I might."

And when he does get out, Rodney says, smoking, drinking and criminal behavior won't be an option.

The reason?

"Freedom is very important to me."