

## Dan

Continued from Page 12

just creates a lot of undue stress — undue distrust, really.”

Education about safe sex over the past few years has made huge strides towards controlling the spread of the virus, he says, but the government didn't act as soon as it should have to warn people.

“It's putting so many pressures on the health care system now, and the Social Security system. If the government had woken up, they could have prevented all of it. I just feel that they really let us down in that aspect.”

And while the homosexual community has responded accordingly to education, he says, the heterosexual community is lagging.

“A lot of people look at HIV as a bunch of homosexual men who deserve it. No one deserves it.

“And this virus doesn't know sexual orientation, it doesn't know color, it doesn't know what sex you are. The heterosexual community better wake up, 'cause it's spreading rapidly.”

Dan says he sometimes has trouble understanding why new people, both homosexuals and heterosexuals, continue to show up at support group meetings.

“It's not like I condemn people who come in now, and say, 'Why didn't you wake up to all the brochures and the education?' because it's a personal choice, and I feel sorry for anyone who has HIV. But also, a lot of times, I can't consider themselves in my same category, because, I believe I am highly educated, and if I had known about it then, I definitely

would not be in this boat today.”

Looking back seven years, Dan says he feels no bitterness towards the two people he believes could have transmitted the virus to him.

“A lot of people spend too much time when they get HIV asking, 'Oh, who did I get it from, who did I get it from?' I told the two people that I felt I could have gotten it from. I spent maybe a couple days thinking about it. It doesn't even cross my mind hardly anymore. . . . I kind of wonder how those two people are doing. But I don't place any blame. The only one I place blame on is the federal government for not telling us sooner — knowing about it sooner but not telling us about it sooner. It's hurt a lot of people.”

Dan says he has been more successful in adjusting to the reality of the disease than many other gay men.

“A lot of gay men don't have self-esteem. They've always been put in the closet. And they don't have it. They'll start drinking or doing drugs, partying a lot — That's a big denial phase for a lot of people. That's how they'll deal with it. The thing is, once you get an HIV diagnosis, if you have changes that need to be made in your lifestyle, you've got to make them now. Not five years from now.

“My best friend has full-blown AIDS. He just got out of the hospital, and he's right back to smoking a pack a day. I guess that's a form of denial.”

Despite his generally positive outlook, Dan says he does occasionally question his own future.

The government is not releasing new drugs fast enough, he says — it should make some exceptions to the normal procedures for getting drugs to treat AIDS on the market. And he resents not being able to participate in some of the experimental treatments that are available to HIV-positive people on the East and West coasts.

But his most pervasive dilemma centers on whether he ever will get back into mainstream society, and whether he ever again will have a meaningful relationship, he says.

“I had an ex-lover who said, 'Why do you surround yourself with people who have HIV?' . . . Well, this has been my life now. This is my life. These are my friends. They've been there for me. And I'm there for them.

“It's hard for someone who's HIV negative to understand my issues. . . . I find myself seeking out people with HIV more now than I did before — because of my longevity. Those who don't have HIV say, 'God you've had it a long time, you're going to croak tomorrow.' That's how they look at it, which is sad.

“There was this friend of mine with full-blown AIDS here about a year ago, who developed like a two- or three-month relationship with another person with full-blown AIDS. But it was the most powerful relationship he's ever had. A lot of people say you can't make a relationship for three months — but they had something. They had something special,

and they didn't let their status get in the way.”

Despite such frustrations, the relationships he has formed since contracting HIV have been some of his most rewarding.

“I've met some of the greatest people,” he says — one of whom is a woman he met at the HIV test site seven years ago.

“She's been there since day one,” he says of the woman, who works at the test site. “And, she's lost a lot of people, you know, and it's just amazing how she'll look at me and say, 'What are you doing right?' and I'll say, 'What are we doing right.'”

His relationship with his parents also has evolved to a different level from what it was when he first told them he had contracted HIV, he says.

When Dan recently attended a trade show in Texas with his parents, he decided to wear a handicapped sticker as a precaution for the long day. But he says his parents weren't uncomfortable when others studied him curiously, trying to figure out what possibly could be his disability.

“They were just so proud of me.” But what seems to be most remarkable is Dan's own evolution with HIV.

“I've experienced so much more than most people have with this disease. I think that's an asset,” he says with a laugh. “I say it's a challenge. I think some superior power is saying, 'I'm going to challenge you with this, and I'm not going to make it easy.’”

*“The ideal life is in our blood and never will be still. Sad will be the day for any man when he becomes contented with the thoughts he is thinking and the deeds he is doing, — where there is not forever beating at the doors of his soul some great desire to do something larger, which he knows that he was meant to do.”*

— Phillips Brooks

The  
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MAGAZINE

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