



HIV-positive speaker gives face to illness for students



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"I think the No. 1 problem with HIV awareness deals with the fact that society is scared of sex," he said.

He should know.

He admitted he has sometimes concealed the fact that he contracted HIV 14 years ago.

McCarty, whose parents live in his small hometown in Illinois, said he feels close to his large extended family, consisting of more than 15 uncles and aunts. But only his mother, father, brother and sister-in-law know of his illness.

"There are so many people who know or care about me who don't know I'm HIV-positive," he said.

McCarty's friend Marta Hartley has been HIV-positive since the late 1980s. Like McCarty, she does volunteer speeches on a regular basis about her experiences. She said McCarty's situation with his family is not out of the ordinary for people infected with the virus.

"They don't go out of their way to let anyone know," she said. "If my family ever does talk about it, it's because I brought it up." McCarty shows no visible signs of his illness. In fact, he's in exceptional health for an HIV-positive person. But when he first learned he had the disease, he thought he was as good as dead.

That day in 1985, McCarty drove back from the Lancaster County Health Clinic in a state of terrible shock. He had a new, life-threatening virus called HIV and was among the first people in Lincoln to be diagnosed.

Doctors told McCarty, then 21 years old, that he had one to three years to live.

"I remember driving my car back to my apartment and planning my funeral," he said. "I felt so alone and didn't know what to do."

McCarty said he fell into a deep hopelessness concerning his future. He quit his physical training courses at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and took a full-time job at a machine shop.

He soon felt the ramifications of HIV-AIDS phobia, which escalated at a time when television reports of cases of Ryan White and Rock Hudson started building a public awareness of the disease.

Word spread around the machine shop that he was HIV-positive, and his employer gave him an

ultimatum: He had to quit or give the company the permission to tell employees that he had the disease.

Hartley said HIV-inflicted people aren't necessarily welcome on work sites.

McCarty quit his job as a machinist, choosing to avoid the controversy and embarrassment of confronting his coworkers with an illness that was perceived as mysterious and frightening.

Unemployed with the most uncertain of futures, he called home to tell his parents of his virus. The first words from his father's mouth were, "When are you going to die?"

Fourteen years later, McCarty said he looks more healthy than he did before he became ill. He spent his college years before his diagnosis partying rather than going to the gym to work out.

"If I only went out three nights a week, that would've been a bad week," he said. "Not to mention a trip up to Omaha every weekend."

One of those trips to Omaha was the fateful excursion for McCarty. He contracted HIV at a party where he met a partner after heavy drinking, which led to a one-night stand.

More than a decade's worth of new medications, doctor check-ups and rising and falling cell counts have followed that night. Currently his CD-4, an important cell count, is above 700. That's higher than many people's counts who don't have HIV or AIDS.

His hopeful and realistic demeanor don't reflect his illness, either, although he knows what the rate of survival has been for others with the virus.

"I feel very fortunate to be here," he said. "I've lost 50 friends to full-blown AIDS."

McCarty is quick to credit federal programs implemented to help ill people like himself survive. He said he receives disability benefits such as Medicaid and Section 8 housing for low-

income people with disabilities. More than \$30,000 in federal money pays for a lengthy list of prescription drugs that keep McCarty alive. He lives off a \$600 disability-benefit stipend each month.

"I would love to work," he said. "But it wouldn't be financially worth it."

McCarty said he would lose more money by working part time because he would have to pay a deductible on his gigantic medication bill. He wants to give back to the tax base, though, and if he could work without losing money, he would.

He expressed excitement about President Clinton's proposal to permit people with disabilities to work without losing their benefits.

McCarty would be able to physically endure four or five hours of work a week, even though he is built like a seasoned construction worker.

His physique is misleading, he said, as he generally needs to sleep 10 to 12 hours each night to make it through a long

day of speaking to high school, college and adult groups.

He gazed proudly at an artistic, nude photograph of himself that hangs on his living room wall.

As McCarty is a fairly reserved and intensely private person, the flamboyant self-portrayal seems out of character at first. He said the photograph was a testament to the hard workouts that have undoubtedly lengthened his life.

"To have someone look at you and ask: 'Will you model?'" McCarty said. "That's the biggest compliment an HIV person can get."

However, people in McCarty's extended family and close-knit hometown haven't learned about his radiant and long-standing triumph over a virus that has killed more than 500 Nebraskans.

He describes his hometown and his parents with the same two words — "surprisingly liberal." Yet his parents feel uncomfortable with the idea of

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DARREN MCCARTY
HIV-positive speaker