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# Spectrum

## AIDS means lots of change

By Rich Flowers

I just decided to change doctors. I asked my current doctor for a copy of all my medical records and a statement about my health. This is what he has to say:

*"... I first saw Rich Flowers on Oct. 11, 1989, when he presented AIDS Related Complex (ARC) with a T-cell count of 110 (normal count +/-800) and Beta-2 microglobulin of 4.4 (0 is normal). He was promptly placed on AZT and Bactrim DS PCP Prophylaxis. His cell mediated immunity as determined by skin test was extremely poor. He has suffered memory loss and impaired concentration, fatigue and exhaustion and has been unable to work. Despite treatment, his T-4 count continued to fall reaching a low of 50 cells in June of 1990. His prognosis is poor. With the T-cell level he now has, an opportunistic infection or cancer is highly possible. He will require continuing on AZT and when this fails, DDI or DDC on an experimental basis. These drugs will entail high expenses for the needed monitoring for*

*high expenses for the needed monitoring for toxicity. Sincerely yours..."*

I am HIV-positive, which means I am infected with the AIDS virus. The virus is active in my body, and I am now classified as ARC. I know I've started losing my hair, but I can't tell whether it's because of the virus or the drugs. I experience frequent muscle aches, eczema, fungal infections, coughs, and dizziness. I take Bactrim, a sulfa drug, everyday to prevent pneumonia. I take Mycelex everyday to prevent thrush, a fungal infection in the mouth. I take 16 capsules of Zovirax, an antiviral, every day and 12 capsules of AZT. I take Trexan, a liquid, at night, and I apply Lotrimin on my skin everyday to prevent rashes and fungal infections. The only way I can sleep at night is by drinking a few beers even though during the day I suffer from fatigue. I identify with senior citizens. I know how they feel. My body is failing me. I am discouraged by the changes taking place in my body.

Life is different. Very different. I thought I was prepared. I recommend that everyone get tested but now I understand why some people don't want to know. There is no cure. AIDS is not even a manageable chronic disease yet.

When I first found out I was infected with the virus, I was faced with my own mortality. I had to reevaluate how I was going to live, if I was going to live. I could have sat at home and waited to die, as a lot of people do, or I could go out, motivated by my anger and grief. I chose the latter.

I'm lucky. I've been openly gay for 15 years now. My parents and sister and brothers have known I'm gay for 15 years. They accept it. My parents have met my previous lovers, each of whom I introduced as my spouse because that's what they were: David, Bruce and Laurence. And although David, Bruce and Laurence are dead, my parents remember them and even spoke to them as they were dying. I'll always remember that. And even with a great support team of family and friends, the most difficult part of AIDS is the isolation. Why didn't I anticipate this? I didn't know it would be like this. Damn. As unexpected as the virus.

My relationships have all changed dramatically. My most important relationship now is with my doctor. My most significant other. My better half. I am breaking up with my current doctor; it's like leaving a lover. I'm not satisfied. He doesn't listen to me. I don't trust him anymore. He's said "I don't know" too many times. The thrill is gone. What do I want? What am I looking for in a doctor? I still need a competent, resourceful doctor. I want my doctor to be well-read. I need my doctor to read me, to guide me, to learn from me as much as I learn from him. (Isn't it bad business to lose so many patients?) I want my doctor to know that for me, this is a crisis. With my current doctor I feel like I'm taking orders from him and carrying them out with as much accuracy as possible. My health is determined

by how closely I follow his orders.

The people who love me and whom I love all want to know what they can do for me. What do I want from them? What are my needs? Well, I want them to realize that I have to deal with AIDS, that I don't have the luxury of ignoring it. I don't expect people around me to suffer. I need these people around me to enjoy me. I object to anyone owning more of my illness than me. I don't expect nor do I want love from people outside my immediate "family." I expect some grasp of my situation. I feel better thinking I am responsible for my condition than thinking as if it were a twist of fate or bad luck. Or that I was bad. I don't think of myself as bad. I don't think of myself as deserving this. I will die from AIDS, but my illness can be eased by the way my friends and family respond to it. I think with AIDS, we all have to become students again. What I wouldn't give to replace all the authority (Get plenty of rest! Avoid stress! Be discreet!) with compassion and a little understanding.

I have never concerned myself with questions of "why." I never thought of blaming anyone or anything. Will knowing these answers lessen the severity of my condition? I don't think so. I'm learning to talk about AIDS. My family and friends have much to gain by allowing me to talk about my condition. I have few regrets. I've done what I wanted. I've never had a job where I had to punch a time clock. I live with a time clock now.

I had a dream recently where I was in prison, on death row. My execution was scheduled for noon on Wednesday. At 11:00 a.m. on Wednesday the warden and chaplain show up and ask me if I'm ready. I point out that it's only 11, I have an hour left. "It's Daylight Savings Time," the warden responds flatly. "You must have forgotten to set your watch ahead an hour." "Let's go."

**Rich Flowers, under his maiden name of Ricardo Flores, graduated the School of General Studies in 1982, with a B.A. in architecture. He currently lives in Manhattan and works as an interior designer.**



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