

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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The fear of being HIV-positive

BY JOSÉ RICARDO MORENO

It was June 24, 2010. I was looking forward to jumping on my first opportunity to volunteer at Pride in D.C. In the midst of getting registered, another volunteer greeted me and we quickly hit it off. He was charming, young, handsome, and knew all the right things to say, a lethal combination. We paired off and spent the rest of the day together. After the Pride March, he invited me to come to the dance afterward. On the dance floor, he passed me a drink, whispered acclamations of love, and much after that everything became a blur. He took me back to his apartment, undressed me, and raped me.

In the middle of it, he announced that he was HIV positive and my world came crashing down. I woke up the next day, disgusted with myself. I quickly got dressed and slipped out of the apartment.

With a million thoughts running through my head, I came to the conclusion, at the tender age of 18, that my life was over.

The theme of this year's World AIDS Day is "Getting to Zero." This theme can manifest itself in many ways: getting to zero infections, getting to zero deaths, getting to zero viral load, but for me it's about getting to zero uncertainty. In the time that I have been at Columbia, I've walked around with the uncertainty of whether I was HIV positive or not, and I don't believe I'm the only one. For several months after my first exposure, I was paralyzed with intense isolation and didn't speak to anyone. I spent extended periods mourning the life I thought I would live and blamed myself entirely.

As sophomore year progressed, I did my best to keep it together. I went to my classes, attended club meetings, ate in the dining halls and tried to play it normal with my friends. They never knew what I was going through. As the semester progressed, I learned more about how HIV was transmitted and how it worked within the body by prowling Go Ask Alice endlessly. In my isolation, I learned that the antibodies for HIV could manifest themselves for up to nine months after exposure. That HIV could only be passed via the exchange of bodily fluids (unprotected sex, sharing needles, being born to an infected mother). Eventually, I found Gay Health Advocacy Project, which offers free, confidential HIV antibody testing, counseling, and other services to students on campus, something we are lucky to have. I then began a regimen of monthly testing.

With each passing month of sophomore year, I would walk up the stairs in John Jay Hall into Health Services, into GHAP for my testing appointment. I would sigh a breath of relief with every negative result I got back. As the year came to November, I stopped having the motivation for classes—the pressure was overwhelming. My last HIV exam consumed my thoughts.

On Nov. 18, 2010, I took my last exam and spent the hours in quiet vigil thinking about the spot I was taking up for another student, how long I had to live, and what my next steps were. The next day, I came in for my results (sweaty palms, slightly panicking as I sat in the chair).

My results were officially negative. Finally.

Since then, World AIDS Day has been a time of reflection. I think about the ways that the support networks like Health Services and CPS can better reach students, what ways we can make the testing experience less intimidating, and how to initiate real conversations about sexual health with others without shaming or judging. I want everyone to know that they should get tested, reach out, and get informed about sexual health because no individual should have to carry the burden of uncertainty alone.

On my desk, I keep a stack of birthday cards that my family mails me every summer that I've been away from home. In every card, my mother reminds me of the difficulties that one has to face in order to make it in this life by invoking the Spanish phrase “*valió la pena*,” or “it was worth the shame.” If someone out there in our community finds strength in these words to keep living in the face of adversity, *valió la pena*.

The author is a Columbia College senior majoring in chemical physics, a resident adviser, and a coordinator for NYC Pride.

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