

Living someone else's script

Woman with HIV continues to build her half of the bridge

Nancy Lawson wants to tell you a funny story about living with HIV disease. The one about having lunch in the elegant dining room on the 10th floor of Meier & Frank, sitting with her daughter, her son and her sister, discussing who will get her clothes and what to do with her body when she dies.

Everyone was hysterical, she says. Seriously.

Lawson navigates a story the same way she makes her way through life with HIV disease—with equal doses of brash humor and reflection, irreverence and hope.

In March of 1987, Lawson went in for an HIV-antibody test she was certain would turn out negative. It didn't. Twenty-two years of marijuana addiction had made her dogged, street-smart and resourceful; she hunted for information and help, read dozens of books, talked to countless people.

Four years later—four years of learning and reading and raging and grieving later—Lawson knows a lot about living with HIV disease. And she's determined to tell others what she discovered.

Whether she's sitting at a café table or standing at a lectern before an audience of 100, Lawson retains the same fizzy style, the open, disarming laugh. Unabashed, in a voice sandpapered by years of smoking, she talks about her recovery and relapse, her sexuality, her 13-year-old daughter, Annie. Mostly, she would like you to understand that she is an ordinary person, with phone bills and dirty dishes and good friends and bad days.

And an illness which is not incidental but not all-consuming, either. Whether she's talking to high school students or drug and alcohol professionals, she wants them to see not A Person With HIV Disease, but Nancy Lawson, 40 years old, a human being not all that different from anyone else, doing her best with the odd jigsaw pieces of a life, trying to make a pattern both meaningful and interesting.

My main goal is to help people see where we're similar rather than where we're different. [HIV] is such a bizarre disease, so misunderstood and so scary to people and so isolating and so alienating. I need to feel like there's some purpose for me to be infected with it.

"What I do is put it on a personal level. It gives me an opportunity to do some personal healing and reaching out to people. I feel pretty grateful that I'm intelligent, articulate, willing to be vulnerable, willing to be out there and build my half of the bridge.

"I had had a relationship with a man who used IV drugs before I met him. Then from 1986 to 1987 I was going to the doctor all the time. I was sick, I was fatigued. The doctor couldn't find out what it was. She had ruled out anemia, hypoglycemia, mono, chronic fatigue syndrome.

"[After I had tested positive for the HIV-antibody], the doctor said, 'I don't know what to tell you to do. I don't know anything about this disease. I don't know how long it will take, if you'll get sick, or what.'

"Then I started looking for who did have an answer. I'm a recovering drug addict, and the drug I used for 22 years was marijuana. So I have that addictive personality and the street education from doing dope for 20 years. If I go somewhere and they say, 'We don't have any,' well, I'm going to go look somewhere else.

"That's what I did with HIV disease. I started buying books and reading them, reading everything in the paper about AIDS. I started reading all I could about nutrition.

"And I made some major changes. I was

have sex with anybody until I learn more about this.' And as I learned more, other people got more scared of me.

"I've had both women and men be attracted to me and then kind of back up, because of all the ramifications. It's a scary thing to think about loving someone who you know is going to die.

"[My daughter] has a really hard time with this. I have a 21-year-old son who was 17 when I was diagnosed. He said, 'Tell me all you know about it.' And I did. Then he said, 'Well, do you have any life insurance?' Which is a really good question. He was probably thinking, 'Well, maybe I can get a car if she kicks it.' I've always been open to wanting to talk about it and make jokes.

"One of the nicest times I had with all of my family was when my sister, my son, my daughter and I had lunch on the 10th floor of Meier & Frank. My son is a punk rocker who dyes his hair black, has a pierced nose and wears these heavy boots with five buckles and steel toes. My sister is a social worker. My daughter's a little preppie, and I'm an old hippie. So we were quite a crew.

"My sister said, 'When you die, I want you to be sure and leave me your clothes.' Then Annie said, 'No, I get some of them.' Then we had a serious discussion about what to do with me when I'm gone.

"My son didn't care if I'm cremated or not. But my daughter said she wanted a grave to go visit. I'm opposed to that environmentally; it takes up too much room. I'm a semi-quasi-Christian-maybe-on-Tuesdays, so I don't have any religious investment in my burial.

"I told Annie I'd get an urn and she could hook it on the car. It was real healthy for us to talk about that stuff.

"One of the hardest days I ever had was after I quit working and applied for disability. I was on welfare for five months. After I was accepted for Social Security, I lost my medical benefits.

"My welfare worker told me I didn't qualify for any programs. That day was like standing on the edge of this enormous precipice, and all there is is down. I probably was feeling kind of sick then, too. When I'm healthy and buoyant, things don't get to me as much.

"The worst days are when I keep dead-ending against the system. I do get sick and spend a couple of days on the couch per month, but I try not to see that as, 'Oh, here it is; it's getting worse.'

"I've chosen to invest a lot of energy in taking really good care of myself. Except for my cigarette smoking, which I'm kind of clinging to desperately. This is my rationale: I gave up drugs, gave up sex, gave up alcohol, gave up making a lot of money. So I'm going to smoke, okay?

"I just dyed my hair red. It was very gray and white, and I thought, 'I don't want to look like an old person. I'm going to do something that makes me look perky.' I snuck out to the Safeway on Sunday morning and bought some hair color and put it in. It was very burgundy. My daughter fell into hysterical laughter on the floor of our living room.

"I don't know if it makes me look younger. But it makes me feel sort of...sparkly.

"Just after I turned 39, I started having major anxiety about turning 40. I spent as much time worrying about it as I did dealing with AIDS. It was very traumatic for me to turn 40. I never planned for it. I was living life one day at a time. I'd never thought about being an elderly woman. But I survived it, and I'm not at all anxious about turning 41.

"When I was first diagnosed, I thought, 'This is someone else's script. You've made a mistake. You've fucked up, buddy.' But when I really make connections with people, I feel as though this is my purpose, this is my path. It's the perfect path for me. It couldn't have been designed any better. This is a gift.

"And the truth is that I always wanted to be famous or a movie star or something.

"I do everything I can do to show people this is just a disease. My really good days are when I touch somebody, when somebody says, 'Knowing you has really made me look at things differently.'"



PHOTO BY MARY TARDONA

working as a word processor in a massive law firm in Dallas, Texas, with 175 attorneys. It was pretty high stress, pretty high-paced.

"I quit my job and moved to Oregon. I spent a month with my daughter, who was nine at the time. I just sort of looked at her, noticed the way her ears were growing. One of the things I've done consistently ever since is to notice how she's growing, count her freckles.

"Also, I relapsed. I had had two-and-a-half years clean and sober. While I was gathering information [about AIDS], I was also flipping out. I had a lot of denial. Then I got angry. I started smoking pot again.

"Then I got to Portland. I was out of money and out of drugs and exhausted. I called CAP and asked them if they referred people to therapists. I said I was having a hard time adjusting to HIV disease.

"I went through a fear episode when I was just accepting that I had HIV disease. I met an AIDS activist from Eugene and invited him over for dinner. Then I started thinking, 'Well, I'll have to get paper plates and plastic spoons and forks and send Annie somewhere for the night, because I wouldn't want her to be around someone with AIDS.'

"Then it hit me that I was going through all these contortions, and this guy couldn't hurt me and couldn't hurt my daughter. AIDS isn't transmitted by plates and knives and forks and spoons. I remembered that I knew all that.

"One of the things that's been a really interesting part of the journey has been spending the last couple of years really looking at my sexuality. I'm still coming to terms with it. Either I'm a not-practicing lesbian or, probably, bisexual. I'm attracted to people of both sexes.

"I haven't had any experience for three-and-a-half years. At first I said, 'I'm not going to

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