

just out

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GUEST COMMENTARY

BY JOE JEFFERSON

Living by markers

A personal reflection

On Dec. 1, people around the world will commemorate the 15th World AIDS Day. Some three months later, I will mark the 15th anniversary of the day when I learned that my body is home to the human immunodeficiency virus.

I am not a long-term survivor, as the conventional labeling goes. In my lexicon, I am a long-term "thrivor," not in spite of but because I am HIV-positive.

In sharing my experience here, I speak for no one else. I share only that which resides in my heart and in my life.

If, in 1988, I had been asked, "What will you be doing with your life in 15 years?" my answer would have been something like: "I'm HIV-positive. My life won't last 15 years." Thus began my gradual and tentative walk along a path with life on one side and death on the other.

Until a few years ago, one marker after another defined my life. Will I live to see my 30th birthday? The '92 election? Next Christmas? The '96 election? The new millennium? My 40th birthday? Each marker passed. Between them, I continued to monitor my test results—CD-4 count: 480, 190, 380, 412. In 1996, enter the viral load test: undetectable, 4,500, undetectable, undetectable and so on. Last month's results—CD-4: 396; viral load: undetectable.

Living by markers was a convenient and possibly necessary way of forestalling decisions about or plans for my future. I had no hope that there would be a future. I was myopic in my attempts at staying alive. Today, after 15 years of living with HIV, I am more alive than ever.

For this, I give credit to two dreams and one conversation.

In the fall of 2001, I had a dream in which I was sitting at the bedside of a dying person. In this dream my role was to help this person let go of this life and to peacefully cross over to the next.

Weeks later, I was walking my dog in Alberta Park. There, I struck up a conversation with a massage therapist who works in the HIV/AIDS arena, most recently presenting at the International AIDS Conference in Barcelona, Spain. The conversation meandered toward the challenges facing people living with this disease.

"I am continually meeting men who were once quite ill. They return to good health, spend hours a day at the gym and do nothing to help those who are still sick," she decried.

One could argue that her comment was somewhat harsh. It nevertheless struck a lasting chord in me and challenged me to ask, "What exactly am I doing to help those who are not as fortunate as I am?" The question took only a few minutes to answer: nothing.

A week passed and brought the second dream, identical to the first. Again, I was helping someone die. I awoke from this dream with a sense of purpose I had never known.

In the middle of the night I discovered what I needed to do next.

Days later, I was sitting in my car with a few minutes to collect my thoughts before an interview with the director of volunteers at Our House, a residence for people with AIDS. I was full of anxiety and doubt. "Am I really up for this? What if I lose it during the tour? 'Maybe I should come back another time.'"

A few deep breaths later and I was in the interview telling of the dreams and the conversation. At once leery and certain, I agreed to begin volunteering Thursday evenings.

It was on a Thursday in November when I met Leonard. He was a resident who recently had moved into Our House. Within a few weeks, we had developed a bond that is with me to this day.

Leonard shared with me what was left of his life and I listened. He became my teacher and I his witness.

Leonard's death ended a difficult life. As his final breath drew near, I held his trembling hand, dabbed his moist forehead and cried.

I cried because it hurt to watch as Leonard raced and struggled to make peace with his life and his family. I cried because I knew this was not how he wanted his life to end. I cried because I feared a similar death might someday visit me.

Through Leonard's dying I learned about life. I learned that I want to die a peaceful death; that every word, every action and every moment matters; that now is the time to heal my wounds and my relationships; and that if I die in four hours or 40 years, I want to be at peace with how I have loved and how I have lived my life.

Leonard died at 2 a.m. Feb. 17. I miss him and I thank him for these lessons and for keeping his promise of letting me know that he made it to the other side.

After Leonard's death, I needed some time away from my volunteer duties. During this respite, I learned that Our House was searching for a development director. I had been in the field for seven years and believed that both my life and volunteer experience would allow for a greater expression of my humanity and a larger contribution to the AIDS community.

It took 14 years of living with HIV for me to develop the courage, purposefulness and determination to face AIDS—directly and completely. Today, I have the privilege of walking through the doors at Our House to begin my workday. I find inspiration in the people who live and work here. And for the first time, I am doing what I am supposed to be doing: living.

It is in memory of Leonard and the other 20 million people who have died of AIDS that I share my small corner of the world as we commemorate World AIDS Day. □

Reach JOE JEFFERSON at jjefferson@ourhouseofportland.org.

REFLECTIONS

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