



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Rachel Pobi, who has been HIV-positive for some two decades, has experienced firsthand the lingering public fear and misunderstanding of AIDS

Rachel Pobi was infected with HIV between 1980 and 1981 while dating a hemophiliac.

When I was first diagnosed in 1986, at the age of 26, I was about as ignorant as most about HIV. But I was determined to learn all that I could about it in order to survive. I didn't tell people who I worked with that I was HIV-positive. People were afraid of the word AIDS. One co-worker would tell me that she no longer went to her regular hairdresser anymore. She assumed that just because he was gay that he might have HIV.

One time, my manager read a letter that arrived to the company. The letter had the acronym HIV in it. She didn't know what HIV was so, ironically, she asked me. I told her it is associated with AIDS. She dropped the letter and shrieked as if the letter would contaminate her. She had no idea that she just hurt my feelings. She didn't know I was HIV-positive, and I didn't tell her either. I fantasized about giving her a kiss on the cheek and then saying, "I have HIV."

Somewhere between 1994 and 1995, I

started to have some real problems. It first started with very bad insomnia. I could not get to sleep. Then one day, I looked in the mirror and I could not recognize myself. I looked like a skull face, and my body was very skinny. I could even feel the bones in my face when I rested my head on my pillow at night. At that point I really felt like I was going to die. When I went shopping or any other place, I felt very embarrassed about my appearance. I would try not to have any eye contact with anyone because I was afraid to see the shock in people's face. I felt like everyone was looking at me.

Pobi successfully started on the cocktail in 1996. She has been happily married to the love of her life for 19 years. Her husband doesn't have HIV.

Richard Francis is host of the KBOO-FM radio show A Different Nature. Diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1989, he volunteered at Juniper House hospice.

I remember [one] guy who was told [he had] only three months. He couldn't walk anymore from wasting.

They had a doctor's book. When you came in you could find out what was happening. I came in and the doctor had written that [the patient] had made the decision that he would walk again. The staff was instructed to humor him. The doctor had given him some token exercises. I went in to him and I said: "I hear you're getting exercise. I give a pretty good massage and I can give you one anytime you need it." He immediately threw back the covers. Thank goodness he was lying on his stomach so he couldn't see my tears. I had never touched a body that was so wasted. I couldn't find any muscle to massage.

That night one of the other guys I was massaging broke down weeping because he said, "Do you know how long it's been since someone has touched me?"

Francis' T cell count was recently 860; he still suffers from fatigue and neuropathy.

Guy Johnson was 21 years old and an expectant father when he learned in 1995 that he was HIV-positive.

I never thought in my wildest dreams that HIV would happen to me. I was 14 when I started using methamphetamine intravenously. I started drinking when I was 9. I had just celebrated a year clean-and-sober, and getting tested was just making sure I was OK because I was changing my life. I can remember talking to the counselor, and he asked what I knew about HIV. I knew some bad jokes: Anal Injected Death Sentence; Bend over do a "Magic" trick; What do you call Rock Hudson in a wheelchair? Roll AIDS.

On TV I saw preachers saying that it was God's retribution against homosexuals, people protesting in front of hospitals because they didn't want to be in the same hospital as AIDS patients; I saw [emergency medical technicians] and fire crews donning radioactive suits to clean up car accidents involving someone with HIV. Suddenly it dawned on me that people were going to think that about me. Imagine living your

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Though straight, Guy Johnson has experienced the homophobic stigma and prejudice that often accompany HIV



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