

NORTHWESTnews

ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

Fired Cirque du Soleil gymnast speaks at CAP auction by Floyd Sklaver

One look at man-of-steel Matthew Cusick and you'd never believe he gets rejected in bars. But the handsome 32-year-old gymnast, who was fired from Cirque du Soleil for having HIV, has had men walk away once they learn he is positive. "They don't state it, but by their actions it's clear they have a problem with HIV," he says.

Now, with his recent exposure as the cover boy for *The Advocate*, being anonymous has become even more difficult. "If they didn't know it before," he laughs, "they sure do now."

Cusick was in town April 10 for Art for Life, an annual Cascade AIDS Project event that raised more than \$360,000. His rousing keynote speech talked about AIDS discrimination and the ways we can continue combating the deadly disease.

Yet, public speaking was not the life Cusick envisioned growing up. "I've always wanted to perform," he says, and "Cirque du Soleil is a dream job for any gymnast."

In 2001, when given the opportunity to audition for the renowned Cirque, he jumped at it. A year later, he was accepted and invited to an intensive four-month training program in the company's home city of Montreal. He left behind his job, his apartment and a budding relationship.

On his first day of training, all of the artists had to go through a medical examination "to see if their joints were OK," says Cusick, who has been HIV-positive since 1992. "During that examination I told the doctor about my HIV status."

He was sent to another doctor for a review of his viral load and medication schedule before finally being cleared for full participation with the company. Cusick completed the training, but with no contracts available (someone has to leave a show before a replacement can enter it) he was sent home to wait. Shortly thereafter, he was called by Cirque for another training slot and, in the course of negotiating that contract, an opening in the Vegas extravaganza *Mystère* opened up.

Cusick trained to be a Russian high bar catcher, preparing to spend each performance 45 feet above the audience, swinging back and forth while catching other performers after they flipped and turned gracefully in midair. "The skills weren't very difficult," he says, "but it was a matter of timing."

He also trained for the Chinese poles, which rise vertically from the stage while the performers hold themselves perpendicular to the pole. "It requires brute strength," he explains. "I look at a gymnast and they are not so huge, but they are very strong."

But even Cusick's strength training couldn't prepare him for what came next. In April 2003, just three days before he was scheduled to debut in *Mystère*, he was suddenly notified that Cirque was firing him for being HIV-positive. "It was a total shock," he says. "They told me I could infect other performers, the crew and even the audience."

Dejected but undaunted, he retreated to his parents' home, took a job as a bartender and contacted Lambda Legal, which filed a discrimination lawsuit against Cirque.

In its complaint Lambda claimed, "Cirque du Soleil denied Cusick a job without a valid reason, since he does not pose a health risk or safe-



PHOTO BY JIM RADOSSIA

Matthew Cusick shares his story with Art for Life donors April 10 at Montgomery Park

"I've always wanted to perform.... Cirque du Soleil is a dream job for any gymnast."

—Matthew Cusick

ty threat to himself or anyone else." Cirque's attorneys responded by saying the company was acting as a "socially responsible employer" with an obligation to avoid "known safety hazards."

The outcry was fierce, with international media attention focused on Cirque and nationwide protests at many of its touring shows. Celebrities such as Nathan Lane, Rosie O'Donnell and Chita Rivera urged Cirque to reconsider its policy and reinstate Cusick.

Then, in December, Cirque got into even more hot water when it announced, "There are many employment positions that would be suited to an individual with HIV [including] dishwashers, dining room attendants, prep cooks, box office staff, box office assistants, ushers, hosts/hostesses, food and beverage staff, public sales assistants, merchandising staff and hawkers." As Lambda put it, "Our client's dream job is to be a performer, not a dishwasher."

It all came to a head in January when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission determined that Cirque likely engaged in illegal discrimination and the company offered to "re-integrate" Cusick as a performer. (At press time the case was still in mediation.)

Now working part time as a personal trainer, Cusick is determined to make something positive out of being positive and has begun speaking publicly about HIV discrimination. "I am here to put a face to HIV," he says. And with a face—and body—like his, people are sure to listen. **[M]**

FLOYD SKLAVER is a Portland free-lance journalist.

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