

Dying man has found acceptance

AIDS patient accepts diagnosis
and is determined to live his life

Last in a series.

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Editors' note: The people in this story are real. Their names have been changed to protect their privacy.

For a person with AIDS, John is one of the lucky ones. He isn't placing blame on someone else. He isn't looking for pity. He's just looking for hope and peace of mind.

And he thinks he's found it.

"I take full responsibility for what has happened to me," said John, a 40-year-old salesman.

He found out he has AIDS last December, a year after Bobby, his boyfriend of five years, was diagnosed with the disease.

Bobby had a cold which progressed into bronchitis and then into a respiratory infection. He then entered a hospital for tests.

"The doctor came into the hospital room one night when

we were both there, and he explained that Bobby had bona fide, full-blown, down-home AIDS," John said. "The doctor explained that statistically, Bobby had two years. But he could live another month or

he could live 20 or 30 years more.

"I was scared more for him than for me," John said of his initial reaction. "I wasn't too worried about me. I'm a survivor. Whatever comes along will work itself out."

The news settled in after the doctor left the room.

"When the doctor left, I looked at Bobby. He looked at me, and we started crying. We hugged each other, and he said, 'Oh, God. It's AIDS. I don't want to die.' That scene has always stuck with me."

His concern about how Bobby would deal with the news was settled the next night.

"Bobby is deeply religious in his own way. When I went back the next night, he said, 'God and I had a long talk last

LIVING WITH



Religious beliefs strengthen AIDS victim

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 night and it's going to work out."

THE YEAR SPENT coping with Bobby's illness gave John time to think about the possibility that he, too, would get AIDS.

"I'd kind of coped with it for a year. When I found out that I had it, there weren't any surprises," he said.

Perhaps because there were no surprises, John has been able to come to terms with the disease. He decided not give in to the virus, which is almost always fatal.

"I'm going down leading a brass band," he said. "I'm going to lick it."

Telling his religious family in Oklahoma was one his first obstacles. He made the announcement after a big family dinner of turkey, dressing and lemon meringue pie (his favorite).

"Telling them that I had AIDS was not easy. We all cried. Just think how it would be to tell your family that you're dying of terminal cancer," said John, who had never told his family about his homosexuality.

"I went up there with Bobby, fully expecting to be thrown out of the house after I told them," said John. "They knew about me and didn't really approve of my lifestyle. But they were... incredibly kind."

"Everybody up there knew that I was gay. You don't get to be 40 and never been married and always have male roommates without people wondering," he said.

"As far as family reaction, I'm the luckiest guy in the world," he said. "My father said he kind of expected it. He just said, 'Now that it's here, tell me what you know and what you plan to do.'"

"My stepbrother was rather cool, but he's a great one for machismo and doesn't show much emotion. But his wife knew (I had AIDS) before anyone else up there."

"As far as family goes, I'm one of the incredibly lucky ones," he added.

Bobby wasn't as lucky. His family back told him never to return to the North Carolina mountains.

"His 16-year-old brother has told him that if he ever comes back, he will personally blow Bobby's brains out," John said.

Almost as difficult as telling his family was telling his co-workers. But John's task was a little easier since a co-worker had AIDS before he did, and the company had already developed a policy concerning it.

Co-workers have been told about John's condition, but clients have not. John's boss said clients really don't need to know that an employee has AIDS.

Most of his co-workers have been sympathetic and understanding of his plight, he said. But some still ask how he could have such a good attitude about a disease that could kill him.

"One of my co-workers asked me the other day, 'How do you deal with this? You could die at any time.' I said that yes, I could. But so could you, so why worry about it?" he said. "I really don't worry about it. God's going to take you when he wants to, anyway," he added.

JOHN CONSIDERS HIMSELF a religious man. He grew up in Oklahoma with very religious parents, he attends church regularly.

"I am a Christian," he said.

The church and religion are very important to John, and the churches that turn their backs on AIDS victims are turning their backs on God, he said.

"Look at that family in (Arcadia) Florida. The church didn't even want them in the church at a time when that family needed the church," he said. "There is a hot, hot, hot, hot place in hell waiting for those people who turned that family away."

John studies people as part of his job and has seen a trend toward fear and fear-mongering, he said.

"What I perceive — and I'm no better myself — is that all of us fear what we don't understand. It doesn't

matter if it's cancer, AIDS or a hang-nail. That's why so many heterosexuals are afraid of gays. They don't understand our lifestyle," he said.

John rejects the notion that God sent AIDS as a "Gay Plague," a judgment against homosexuals and

"I've got a powerfully optimistic outlook. But it's one thing to keep a good attitude. It's another to remain optimistic when all your friends are dying on you. I have lost seven close friends to this disease since 1984. You just can't fathom the pain you go through watching someone you care about suffering and not be able to do a damn thing about it... Death does not scare me. But the suffering is spooky. I don't want to suffer..."

— John, an AIDS patient

their lifestyle. "If they'll buy into that argument — that it's a gay plague — then they have to buy into the belief that God sent sickle-cell anemia to get the blacks and that he sent Tay-Sachs disease to get the Jews," he said.

"It's the ignorance and fear (about AIDS) that makes things so bad. And the biggest merchants of fear and ugliness are the television evangelists. They feed on that," John said.

Fundamentalist Christians like to "pick on the queers," John said, because "for too many years, the queers never fought back."

"We don't live in Old Testament times," he said. "Leviticus is the laws of the Jews before Jesus was crucified. It doesn't count anymore. Besides, when it comes to sex, people are so prone to pick and choose which scriptures they want to believe."

John said that fundamentalist Christians "just go bonkers" when he reminds them that in the New Testament Jesus said nothing about homosexuality.

"The only thing that Christ ever condemned was sex without love," John said.

THERE MAY BE a positive side to all the pain and suffering that AIDS has brought to the gay community, he said, since homosexuals are discovering the art of dating and

romance. For years, John said, gay men have had sex first and talked later.

"A lot of concerned gays have said that gay males tend to shake hands with their genitals. Gays go about it all wrong," he said. "They jump into bed and then worry later if it's going to work out."

The blatant promiscuity that ran rampant for so many years in the gay community is wrong, John said.

"I know that I and other members of my church say that blatant promiscuity and sex without love are wrong," he said.

And, John said, that belief works for homosexuals and heterosexuals alike.

Having AIDS has strengthened his and Bobby's relationship, John said.

"That's not to say that we don't fight at all or as much as we used to. He keeps my blood pressure up," John said. "There's a lot more tension, but that's on my part. I'm the breadwinner of the family, and I worry about that."

Bobby, who never finished high school, did landscaping for several years, but has been unable to work since his illness.

The two men have been living together for five years, and the relationship shows no signs of ending, John said.

"When we found out that Bobby had AIDS, everyone asked what I was going to do. I asked them what they meant and they said, 'Are you going to throw him out?' I told them, 'Hell, no, after as much as we've been through? We are very committed to each other,'" he said.

Sometimes he wonders if he gave AIDS to Bobby, John said.

"Both of us were typical gay men before we met. We were not virgins. I have often asked myself could I have given it to him, instead of him giving it to me," he said. "But really, I don't think it matters who gave it to whom. We could've given it to each other."

A bright, conservative man with degrees in history and political science, John said education of the general public and people potentially most susceptible to AIDS is extremely important.

"Education is very important because some people are still not getting the message. It's like smoking. We all know that smoking is bad for you, but 28 percent of all Americans still smoke," he said. "People have to learn how to protect themselves. The ignorance in the world hurts more than the disease."

But, he said, some people have chosen to remain ignorant.

"They don't want to understand it," John said. "They just say, 'I'm not queer and I don't have it,' and leave it there."

JOHN AND BOBBY are under treatment for AIDS at the Dallas-Fort Worth Medical Center in Grand Prairie and are taking the experimental drug Carrisyne, developed by Grand Prairie pharmacologist Bill McAnalley.

"I feel better than I have in two years," John said.

Bobby has experienced some stomach disorders while on the drug, but those disorders were present before he had AIDS, John said.

Even so, John thinks Carrisyne is

working wonders, both for him and Bobby.

"I think they're on to something out there. But it's the nastiest tasting stuff you've ever had," he said. John said he mixes the Carrisyne with Crystal Light drink mix to kill the taste.

Although he said he feels stronger than ever, John realizes that he probably will be taking Carrisyne or some other drug for the rest of his life.

"I don't think they're going to find a cure any time soon. They haven't cured diabetes yet, but you can control it. My mother was diagnosed as a diabetic when she was 8. There was no insulin back then. The doctors told her she would die in two years. She lived until she was 56. That's the longest two years I've ever heard of," John said.

Although the medical professional says the average AIDS victim will die within two years, there are stories of limited successes, he said.

"Look at Dan Cooper. He's the longest-living AIDS patient. He's had it since 1981. A friend of mine read an interview with Cooper and he (Cooper) said that they tell you about the casualties of AIDS, but they don't tell you about the 13 percent who've lived two years or more," John said.

"I've got a powerfully optimistic outlook. But it's one thing to keep a good attitude. It's another to remain optimistic when all your friends are dying on you. I have lost seven close friends to this disease since 1984," John said. "You just can't fathom the pain you go through watching someone you care about suffering and not be able to do a damn thing about it."

John thinks about his own death. "Death does not scare me. But the suffering is spooky. I don't want to suffer," he said.

"I told my boss that, in the ideal scenario, I would work through Friday and clean out my desk, go into the hospital that weekend and be dead by the end of the week."

The lesson AIDS has taught John is a simple one.

"Trust God," he said. "You have to trust God."

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