Editor’s Letter

December 14, 2010 By Kate Ferguson

It’s been said that if you don’t do things for yourself no one else will. But that’s not always true. Although self-advocacy can’t be overstressed—especially where your health is concerned—sometimes your champion may be a loved one or a stranger who steps in to help on your behalf.

This is what happened when my former husband was diagnosed with AIDS in the early ’90s. He and I were miles apart, literally and figuratively. As the virus progressed, he lost a staggering amount of weight and became extremely weak. In those days, HIV was a death sentence. Scientists knew what caused AIDS, but they couldn’t figure out how to stop it. His mother—a nurse—and I had stayed in touch, but our lives had gone in different directions. She told me she had become his advocate because he was in no condition to fight this battle alone. She’d visited the penitentiary where he was incarcerated, and she discussed his condition with the facility’s administrators. They agreed to release him to her for home care. At the time, he weighed about 60 pounds.

Before I continue, first let me disclose. I’m HIV negative. I tested as soon as I heard about my husband’s condition. One year later, I tested again. How I escaped the virus, I still don’t know.

Today, I know much more about HIV and AIDS. One of the most important things I’ve learned about this chronic disease is that people living with the virus can also live normally and lead long and healthy lives.

This longevity isn’t solely a result of modern antiretroviral medications. It’s also because, unlike many years ago when my husband was sick, now there is much more awareness about HIV/AIDS. And advocates have fought for the rights of people living with the virus. The result? More services and support so HIV-positive people can get the help they need to survive and thrive.

When I think about how my former mother-in-law advocated on behalf of her son, I’m awed. Although this *Real Health Focus* emphasizes the benefits of advocating for yourself, it’s also a guide for those whose loved ones are affected by the virus.

Often, a diagnosis of HIV plunges people into despair or a state of panic. What do you do? Where do you go? Whom can you turn to for help?

Really, the answers all begin with you. You can connect to care; you can educate yourself about the virus; and you can learn how to navigate and understand treatment, how to choose the best doctor and how to advocate for your health—or that of others too.

It’s called empowerment. And with it, you and others can once again expect to enjoy a long and healthy life.

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