

Vital Signs

# How could something like this have happened?

How could this have happened? I kept asking myself, over and over, as I listened to an intelligent, informed, young fellow tell me how, a year ago, he had permitted someone who he knew was HIV positive to enter him anally without a condom. And how, as a direct result, he himself became infected with the virus that causes AIDS.

## Jim Graham

Understanding how that happened helps explain why HIV is spreading among Gay youth and why, absent some fundamental change, it will continue to spread in the future. So, here's a story worth telling.

Frank — that's what I'll call him — knew about AIDS: he had been a safe sex peer educator at the first rate college he had attended. Yet he had never had anything amounting to a long-term relationship with another man before coming to D.C. in 1993 with his freshly minted bachelor's degree. Then, he met "Julian."

From the get-go, Julian was forthright, "I'm HIV positive. How do you feel about that?"

Negative himself, Frank's first reaction was that he ought to be open-minded, ought not to discriminate. "I'm fine with that," he heard himself say as if he had lots of experience with people living with HIV. Which he hadn't. For the five months of the relationship that followed, the two hardly discussed HIV again,

Frank thinks he fell in love first. He was happy to "literally run" to Julian's apartment after work, not minding that they never spent time at his own place. He assumed they had a monogamous relationship, but he admits that was never agreed upon. Frank ignored a couple of warning signs: a case of crabs, followed by nonspecific urethritis, which should have told him that something was awry. When Frank finally wondered whether Julian might be seeing others, firm denials put him at ease. Frank wanted to believe all was well.

It all started innocently enough. No drugs, no booze, no late night cavorting. A Saturday afternoon and Julian was folding his laundry, of all things, when they started to "fool around." Without a word, and for the first time, Julian penetrated Frank, and he did so without a condom.

"Whatever were you thinking?" I asked. "I mean, you knew he was positive, right?"

"Right. I felt like I needed to say something, but I didn't know what to say or how to say it. 'Stop' came to mind. And other thoughts — if he doesn't cum, I'll be fine, or he'll pull out early, or what if I apply subtle pressure indicating I was uncomfortable? But subtle didn't get me anywhere. It's not like he stopped to ask me anything."

"And then what?"

"At a certain point, I just disconnected and let it happen to me. I wasn't think-

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ing about excitement. I wasn't thinking about anything. I just wanted it over." And that took five minutes or so. Nothing was said. Frank remembers washing himself in the bathroom and nothing else about that night.

Weeks after they had broken up for reasons unrelated, Frank decided to get tested. Just to be sure. When Frank thinks today about his reaction to his positive result, he's struck by how he walked about saying, first to the counselor, and then to others, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Like he had let others down. Like he should have known better. For Frank, it was all about self-esteem or, more accurately, the lack of it. It was about thinking that something — really anything — was better than nothing. "I probably didn't think that much of myself."

Both of us were very silent after he said that. I looked into his bright young eyes, and I felt sad in a deep way. Frank

was saying that he had failed, but I was thinking that we had failed him. Not as a community, not as a clinic, but as a society. He felt undervalued because that's exactly the message that he had gotten from virtually all sides, year after year, all of his life. Our society had failed him, because we hadn't mustered the will to marshal the major resources that are really needed to fight the spread of AIDS. There are many Franks. Study after study is showing high numbers, 25 percent or more, of young Gay men engaging in unsafe anal intercourse. Men, the studies observe, who "ought to know better."

Really? My sadness turned to anger: When if ever, will this society deal with the issues of self-esteem that had kept Frank quiet during the minutes that Julian was thrusting the virus into him? When will the Gay-positive programs start in our school systems? When will the materials be developed? When for God's sake will we begin this life affirming work? I asked these questions to myself. The answers that came to mind didn't make me any happier.

Later Frank ran into Julian and told him of his test results. "That's too bad," was all that Julian had to say. "That's too bad."

Damn right. On all counts.

*Jim Graham is the executive director of Whitman-Walker Clinic. "Vital Signs," his column dealing with community issues, appears monthly in the Blade.*