

HIV

No Longer A Death Sentence

By NOAH C. ZUSS

Rick Mueller, writer, presenter, and advocate, is so full of life one might think he takes pep pills for energy. Turns out the only medication he relies on is the sweetness of life and a host of antiretroviral drugs he needs to keep his T-cell count up because he is HIV positive.

The full of energy Mueller is a spark plug; he seems to be constantly on the go. He has traveled the entire world since being diagnosed and cycled in more continents than most Americans have ever visited.

Mueller's mission in life, other than biking across Africa, is to build pride among individuals with HIV. He wants people to know that this community is here and not going away.

He also feels very passionately about helping young people make good choices and has made education his mission.

"If I can help educate someone younger than me, gay, straight or

whatever about my story and help them make healthier choices and prevent someone from getting the virus it's all worth it," he said.

An avid fitness and exercise fanatic, he is also one of between 33.4 and 46 million people currently living with HIV. But the virus has never slowed him down.

He has lived with this fact since the early 1980s.

Sounding somewhat incredulous he feels lucky to be alive.

"I have been very lucky," he said. "I don't know why I am alive. It makes life more difficult, but it also made me slow down and really start living."

Living in Queens for almost 20 years, Mueller became well-known for his dedication to advocacy work on behalf of the HIV infected. He has been involved with the Queens Lesbian and Gay Pride Center since it opened in 1996.

To build awareness of the virus he

designed and runs a special program called "Pride not Prejudice-HIV and Pride" that visits public schools to teach students about safe sex and HIV education.

"The program deals with issues kids face," he said. "These are matters of safe sex, dating, real life scenarios and other sexual issues."

He doesn't sugar coat his message as he feels it's important to expose young people to unedited education.

The 90-minute program, begun in January, has been very successful and brought much attention to Mueller's cause. His story and the program were recently featured on local cable station NY1, and he was named "New Yorker of the week" for his unorthodox approach and passionate advocacy work.

"It's a great program and the kids are fantastic," he said.

Mueller has been officially sanctioned by the Department of Education as a program vendor. The DOE has already bought 10 presentations from him since he began visiting schools in January.

The school presentation begins with his sometimes graphic, always engaging story of coming of age in New York in the late 70s as a gay man. During the presentation to a teenage audience he spares few details of par-

ving at clubs and making what he calls "some bad choices."

Shunning a soft approach Mueller said, "I want to be as open as I can."

The program then moves to a production of a short play using several professional actors.

The play, titled, "A Message From Rhonda" was written by Mueller himself and traces the paths of three high school students that contract HIV within the course of a school year.

The program is designed to build awareness about HIV in all young people and is not aimed at the lesbian, gay or bisexual community. He mentions that the program "deals with homophobia a bit," but is focused on building pride in all communities.

Funding for the program comes from a grant secured by City Council Speaker Christine Quinn to the QIGPC, which in turn provides monies to Mueller for the program.

"My life is pretty good now," the middle-aged writer and advocate said while relaxing on a couch in his cozy home.

A feeling of accomplishment washing over him, he said, "My play, I think I am going to win the Pulitzer Prize. I have dreams; there is possibilities. HIV is no longer a death sentence."



Rick Mueller

Wide Open Spaces