

Living To Tell Our Stories: Minnesotans and HIV/AIDS

In 2009, Anne Elmer will enter her 20th year of living with HIV. Diagnosed in 1990, she was told she probably had three healthy years to live. Her doctor would not promise anything beyond that grim prediction. After receiving her diagnosis, Anne told only her family and a close circle of friends. In 1995, she shared her diagnosis with her co-workers in a group setting with over 200 people and followed up with a first-person article in her workplace newsletter. "I simply had to deal with the situation on a personal level before making it a public one," Anne wrote, adding that she wanted to set the facts straight before the rumor mill started to churn.

Anne considers sharing her story arguably the best thing she could have done for her health. "My doctors say that one of the biggest enemies of the immune system is stress," Anne said at the time. "For the longest time, I could not say what was on my mind every day. After I shared my story, people would come up to me to show their support. Some people felt comfortable enough to tell me about their health problems. The support from my coworkers has been amazing." Just as she took sharing her diagnosis into her own hands and did it on her own terms, Anne has taken control of her physical and emotional fitness. An avid hiker and physical fitness enthusiast, Anne participated in her first AIDS Ride in 1997, completed her first Red Ribbon Ride in 2008 and is the captain of her team for the 2009 Red Ribbon Ride. Anne encourages other HIV positive people, especially women, to ride along or volunteer. Currently, Anne is the only openly HIV positive woman on the ride. She adds, "You don't have to

announce your HIV status unless you want to." Anne, a certified personal trainer, also encourages other HIV positive individuals to add physical conditioning to their life by convincing them the effort could be worth the time and their life.

Anne's journey with HIV began when she had unprotected sex with a man. Shortly after their physical encounter, she learned he was HIV positive. She recalls going alone to get her test results and riding the bus home in semi-shock. After the shock and numbness wore off, Anne set about putting the pieces together; wondering what would happen next. During the course of her journey, Anne has been the recipient of numerous Ryan White funded services, beginning with her first call to the AIDSLine for information and legal assistance. In addition, she has received assistance with insurance premiums and medications. This assistance has enabled her to pursue a career in personal training and allowed her to live an active, healthy life with HIV. Anne credits her success with HIV to a combination of effective medical treatments and a positive, healthy attitude. Although she enjoyed an extended drug holiday from her treatment regimen, she is currently on a good combination of medications with few side effects and is grateful for the assistance offered through Ryan White programs.

Anne believes that her active lifestyle and physical fitness has definitely been a benefit in her journey with HIV disease. She manages to control her stress level and she appreciates every minute of life. When asked what advice she would offer to anyone newly diagnosed with HIV or AIDS, she simply says, "Manage the stress and learn to prioritize and most importantly, appreciate every minute of life."

