

LMAO – Laffing My AIDS Out

By Robin Pittis

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How would you like to pay for one mistake with medication, hospital visits, public fear and judgement for the rest of your life? How would you like to risk a five year prison sentence every time you make love without proof of consent? ...and could you find it in yourself to laugh about all that?

Jim Maxwell's life as an HIV positive Hamiltonian, is not uncomplicated, but he's not exactly living on death row, either, and he wants you to know it. And laugh with him. "When I first went to Second City in Toronto to get comedy training, it was a bucket list thing" he said. "It definitely helped me see that I'm not just this 'dying guy', I can be funny, and I can use that." Eventually he realized that kicking the bucket could wait and his bucket list could be a wish list.

"When Jim and I got together," said Brenda Lennie, Jim's partner in comedy (and ex girlfriend), "I was all fraught and full of information from the eighties. With the advances in medication today, there's really a lot of hope. You can live with HIV into old age. It's not like before the triple cocktail."

"When I was first diagnosed the medications were awful," Maxwell added. "It was like twenty pills a day, all at precise times. I'd get side effects like kidney stones and ingrown toenails and fat on the back of my neck. But they've rolled all the different medications into three a day now."

Jim met Brenda when she was teaching an improv class at the Blue Angel Gallery on James North, and there was chemistry right away, which meant Jim had to disclose.

"We call it dropping the H bomb, in the HIV community," he said. And it's a good thing he did, because at the time if they had had sex without that disclosure and his status had come out later, he could have gone to jail, even if they had used a condom.

The supreme court recently ruled 9-0, however, that an HIV positive person, whose viral load is very low, and who uses a condom is not at duty to disclose their positive status, because the "the realistic possibility of transmission of HIV is negated".

Jim and Brenda wanted to raise awareness about the issues facing people with HIV, and the criminalization of HIV, and are using their comedic talents to do it. Lennie had used her improv and comedy expertise in the mental health consumer/survivor community, and they realized it could work for HIV survivors as well.

"When people see that you can deal with the situation with levity rather than gravity, that it's OK to deal with it openly, they can relax and talk about it," said Lennie. "Jim is a natural comedian; give him a wig and he'll come up with a character instantly. His voices and impersonations are really good."

Anyone willing to raise awareness about this issue needs a good sense of humour; and Jim is a wealth of information: "People hear that somebody with HIV is having sex, and they think that alone is criminal:

good lock him up!” he said. “Canada is number two in the world for HIV incarcerations, after the United States. We’re not doing too good as far as human rights go. We seem to want to lock people up pretty quickly, and Hamilton is the worst of our country. It’s a national law, but we’re seeing people in Hamilton get harsher sentences than somebody in BC, or PEI. It’s like they’re on a witch hunt.”

Jim and Brenda have joined forces with Centre3 for Print and Media Arts, and the Unlocking HIV project under the guidance of Ian Jarvis, and are holding a fundraiser September 5th at The Works on Hughson street. They are collaborating on a documentary about HIV disclosure through looking at Jim’s life.

“Ian’s been a great catalyst”, Jim asserts. “We have comedians coming to Hamilton from Toronto for the fundraiser, and that’s usually the other way around. Gavin Crawford from This Hour Has 22 Minutes will be here”.

Paul Hutcheson, who has been described as “like Jim Carrey, but less obnoxious”, is going to perform, as well as Jim and Brenda. Hamilton’s much loved siren of song, maven of musicals, agitator and activist extraordinaire Lyla Miklos will be singing, and there will be other performers: Heidi Mole, David Green, and DJ John Caffery. You couldn’t get more fun for ten bucks, or give to a better cause.

Look for the Centre3 documentary to be presented this World AIDS Awareness Day – December 1st.

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Sept. 5, 7pm. @ 121 Hughson St. N.

www.unlockingHIV.com