

Chapter 1

My Dream

One morning in September 1995, I was working at *Kids Plus* as I had done most mornings since first opening up the toy and gift store. After working for only a couple of hours, I was exhausted to the point I was barely able to walk and felt worse than I could ever remember. Including my mother, Shirley, there were three of us working at *Kids Plus* that morning. Before lunch, I told Mom I felt horrible and needed to leave for the day.

When I arrived home, I parked in the garage and struggled from the car through the door into my family room and collapsed, too tired to attempt even a trip to the bedroom. I woke up on the sofa later that afternoon with a fever of 105. Before nightfall, I was in the emergency room of Saint Luke's Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri.

After running a few tests, the doctor walked into my hospital room to deliver the news I was dreading. I had *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, commonly known as PCP, the most frequent cause of death for people with AIDS. My CD4 count was zero, meaning my immune system was no longer functioning.

I had been diagnosed with HIV nine years earlier, but my health had been excellent, until just the last few months. I knew that having PCP meant I was no longer just a person infected with HIV; I had just progressed to someone living with full-blown AIDS.

As I lay in the hospital, I was not afraid of dying. In fact, I was “ready to go.” During the last nine years, I had emotionally come to grips with the fact I would die from complications of AIDS.

I was in a reflective, almost cheerful mood. God had answered my prayers by giving me almost a decade of good health so that I could raise my sons, Chris and Matt. They were only 11 and 8, respectively, when I first learned I was HIV-positive. Yes, I had been extremely lucky. A number of friends and acquaintances who had been diagnosed with HIV around the same time had passed away years before.

One night while I was asleep in the hospital, I had a dream. In my dream, I felt as if I were floating in a huge, puffy white cloud drifting slowly through a perfectly blue sky. Even though I was alone, I felt protected and loved. Suddenly, I heard a forceful, yet gentle, voice say to me, *“Don, I’m sorry, but you’re not going to die now. You still have a job to do. You’re going to go out and teach teenagers what they need to know so that they never get AIDS.”*

I woke up immediately. It had been a short dream, but I knew instantly my life was going to change. I was going to leave the hospital. I was not going to die anytime soon. I somehow understood the messenger in my dream did not intend for me to talk to simply a few teenagers. I sensed I would be talking to hundreds and hundreds of them.

I was bewildered by this new knowledge as well as quite angry. Over the previous six months, I had started to lose weight, and my health and energy level had deteriorated significantly. Once I finally managed to drag myself out of bed each morning, I would head to the bathroom to shave. After shaving, I was so exhausted that

I had to lie down for a while before I had the energy to shower. After showering, I would lie down again to rest until I finally had enough energy to get dressed.

Life was no longer any fun. It had become a complete struggle, and I had lost any desire to live. I was emotionally and physically ready to die. How in the world was I supposed to teach thousands of teenagers and young adults about HIV/AIDS when I could barely dress myself in the morning?

I had no interest in going out in the world and talking to people about AIDS. Not only was I convinced I couldn't handle it physically, I was terrified of the prospect of *any* kind of public speaking.

Despite my anger and fear, I somehow knew I had no choice in the matter. It was fact; I was going to tell my story to teens and adults in order to help prevent them from contracting HIV. And yet, I had no idea how to get started.

Two weeks after my PCP diagnosis, I was discharged from the hospital, sitting in a wheelchair, unable to walk and hooked up to an oxygen tank. Even though I was nearly six feet tall, I weighed only 119 pounds. I looked as if I had just been released from a concentration camp. I lay at home for months, slowly recovering and thinking about my dream each day. Weeks passed, and I still had no idea how I would ever be able to accomplish my mission.

Apparently, "the messenger" in my dream had a plan, and it must have worked. Since that night, I've had the chance to share my story with more than 100,000 teenagers and adults. That dream changed the entire course of my life. It may be hard to fathom, but during my incredible journey of the last 15 years, I've come to believe that

having HIV is a huge ***blessing*** in my life. As you read my story, I hope you will begin to understand why.