

*This essay is told by a young woman who chooses to remain anonymous. She has submitted it under a pseudonym.*

# ONE MAN'S LIES, MY TRUTH

by Beki Konrad

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**T**his is my story. I am a young woman in today's society living with an incurable Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD). I will take you into a hard world that is my life by sharing with you how I contracted herpes at seventeen years old. I will highlight the physical and emotional effects that herpes has had on my life; the choices I have made to deal with herpes, to take preventive measures, to turn to decisive behaviors, and then to turn my life around to become honest again. This disease has affected my friendships as well as my romantic relationships and has finally rewarded me with strength to deal with adversity, despite my painful journey.

I was exposed to Herpes Simplex B (HSV-2) which is usually characterized as a viral infection that recurs in clusters of vesicles and/or lesions at the genital areas or below the waist of men or women. At this time, somewhere between January and mid-February 2003, I was dating a man from Las Vegas, Nevada who I will refer to here as Mr. Robinson. He withheld many things from me during our relationship. One was his age; I was seventeen and he was ten years my senior. I didn't discover this until long after our relationship had ended. In February, he came to me with accusations that I had given him HSV-2. Yet, I did not experience my first signs of the virus until a month and a half after leaving our relationship. This outbreak consisted of one or two painful blisters on my vaginal area that cleared in a week. Suspicions of herpes lingered in my mind, but I had hoped that these bumps could possibly be ingrown hairs. In August 2003, the bumps reappeared for a second time.

At this time, I visited a doctor who confirmed that I did have Herpes Simplex B. The drive home seemed to take forever. My emotions ran high from despair to anger. I questioned whether or not I could take my own life. Perhaps, that would be easier than living with HSV-2.

Other questions arose such as, “How would it affect romantic relationships or having children?” I thought, “Will I ever have another boyfriend?” “Would my children have herpes?” I did not understand why this had happened to me. Why did Mr. Robinson, when he suspected that he was carrying the virus, point the finger at me rather than warn me?

A few weeks after my doctor visit, I began to accept that I did have herpes. Nothing could be done to change it. The disease was now and forever a part of me. Through this acceptance, I decided to do my best to protect any future partners. By doing so, I educated myself and was able to learn about the disease, its causes, and preventive measures through various web sites which published information on herpes. I also had to be honest with anyone that I would be interested in romantically. Prepared with the information I had received, I could explain the risks and symptoms associated with HSV-2.

I slowly began to date again. During this time, I confronted Mr. Robinson in an email stating that he had given me herpes. I did not do this to point the finger or to seek revenge but to forgive him. He fully denied ever accusing me of giving him herpes or of having herpes himself.

I was able to move forward with dating, always being honest about herpes as soon as I felt any kind of connection with a potential partner. This was not easy as I had imagined. Some people were accepting and willing to pursue a relationship. Some showed gratitude that I was candid, yet didn't want to take the risk. Some agreed to friendship or just disregarded me all together. Others were cruel, even heartless in my efforts to protect them. Sometimes they would treat me as if I were a monster, reacting with utter disgust. People's hurtful words and actions changed me, a change that led me into abusive relationships.

While I was able to maintain relationships, friendships as well as romantic relations, some inflicted lasting painful effects on my life. Many friendships deceived me. Friends who were close to my heart treated me like I was less than nothing. One of my friends, whom I had trusted, was heard by my different acquaintances on numerous occasions to tell people of my disease. When I heard these transgressions, I tried to disassociate myself. My friend then confronted me retaliating that I had pulled away from our five-year friendship. When I justified my actions, she reacted in a violent manner. I also found myself in abusive romantic relationships. The abuse ranged from financial, physical, emotional, and mental. I accepted this abuse because I was afraid that someone else would not love me with my disease. In one of my long-term relationships, the abuser said to me, “No one will ever love you like I do because you have herpes.” I believed him and remained in this unhealthy relationship for over a year.

After four years of abuse, in mid-2007, I had lost hope in finding someone to love me. No longer was I fully honest about my disease. I began to be promiscuous; this led me to hate myself because I knew I could be hurting people through my omissions. I also started drinking heavily, usually followed by sex with a somewhat random partner. Sometimes this would be whoever I picked out of the bar that night. Drinking allowed me to feel that my partners were not at risk. I took some preventive measures and I knew when I could or couldn't have sex because of the disease. I used protection and would occasionally take vitamins (Cats Claw and Olive Leaf) that have been shown to suppress or shorten outbreaks. My sexually active ways continued into early 2009.

Currently, I am in a promising relationship. I go to counseling which helps me with many issues including my herpes. My boyfriend, who has cherished me from day one, is aware of the disease. He has yet to contract HSV-2. He and I abstain from intercourse during my outbreaks to lessen his chances of contraction. He is educated on the virus and is aware of the risks we both face. Also, he has accepted that he may in the future be one of the fifty million people in America living with herpes. In our dreams of having a family, we have had to learn about a child's risk that has a mother with HSV-2. If a child is exposed while in the birth canal, the effect can lead to the death of the child. Thus, we need to consider a possible cesarean section when our family begins.

Through counseling, I have begun to identify the person I must become. For the past six years, I have identified myself as the herpes I carry rather than accepting the disease as an illness. I am also learning to love myself again. I have been able to leave the hurt behind me, no longer masking my pain with a drink, and no longer needing abusive relationships to feel loved.

Since my exposure to herpes in 2003, I have experienced great pain and challenge as a woman with an incurable STD. The confirmation of HSV-2 had left me suicidal and had caused me to turn to any friend or lover who would accept me as a carrier of a dreaded disease. I realize that these relationships have been more abusive and hurtful than herpes itself. The criticism and ridicule I suffered even led me to alcohol abuse as a way to cope with the pain of this life-long disease. I am fortunate that my boyfriend and my counselor have helped me to recover and to begin to overcome the hardest journey of my adulthood. A mere six and a half years has changed me in a positive way. I have become more compassionate and I am grateful I will not die from HSV-2. I am able to learn, to live, and to teach others.

Finally, the pain of my journey no longer needs tears of sorrow, for my forgiveness allows me to feel free of my disease. This is my truth that was bestowed upon me by the deception of Mr. Robinson.

Beki now attends college and hopes to complete a degree in criminal justice someday.