

Scott Fried's Hard Lessons

By Nick Winnick

Scott Fried has been referred to as the “best kept secret” in the United States’ battle for more comprehensive health education. After contracting HIV in 1987, he launched himself at the world of education like a cannonball, making it his mission to provide as many teens as possible with the information and the self-assurance that might have helped him make better decisions himself. With over a thousand engagements and an annual gig for former President Bill Clinton, Fried is fighting tooth and nail against the puritanical abstinence-only sex education agenda of his country’s right-wing.

Fried took some time out to speak with us recently about where he started, how the landscape surrounding AIDS and its sufferers has shifted during the twenty-plus years that he’s been lecturing, and what his secret weapon is in the fight against ignorance.

GC: So, for those who might not have heard your story, could you tell us a little about your experience with AIDS and your work as an educator? When you first contracted the virus, it would’ve been six or so years after the first outbreaks, and a bit before ACT UP got started in New York, right?

SF: Yeah, the first part of December in 1987. Which is really... ironic? I’m looking for a good word. Because I’m an AIDS educator now, and I got infected World AIDS Week. It was the height of the epidemic – I was in the thick of it. I was living in New York and I was in the closet. There are two closets – there’s the *I’m gay* and *I’m not admitting it to anyone*, and there’s the *I’m not gay*. I was in *that* closet, the very back of the closet. I wasn’t even sure that I was going to tell the truth about myself until I had my first gay encounter, whereupon I got infected.

GC: So, being so deep in that closet, was AIDS then something that you thought of as not your problem? You know, like, *this can’t happen to me, because it’s something that only happens to gay men*?

SF: The truth is that I knew that I was gay, and I didn’t want to be gay. And I tried really hard to fight these feelings. When I had sex with this guy, it was as if I was throwing my cards in and folding, and saying, *You know what? I can’t win at this game. I’m losing, acting as a straight man, so I’m going to just fold.* So I chose someone who I wasn’t even that attracted to, and I wanted it to not be good. I wanted to make sure that the sex would be unenjoyable, so that I could convince myself that I wasn’t gay. And there was a separate piece going on at the same time – I remember thinking to myself, lying underneath the weight of his body, in his apartment, *if I get infected with HIV, if I die of AIDS, the world will forgive me for being this man who is gay. They will sympathize.*

So there was this contradiction. But this is what it is to be a young adult, it means to be a contradiction. And that paradox for me was, on the one hand, *I don’t want to be this gay guy*, and the problem was, there was a part of me that *reeeeally* liked it. *This feels great! Damn it, I wanted to not like this!*

GC: As you’ve been doing this, the quality of the medical intervention that we have for HIV has improved dramatically – a diagnosis today doesn’t mean anywhere near the same thing that a diagnosis would mean 20 years ago. Is that making your job harder? Are people getting blasé about AIDS because we can treat it now?

SF: Here’s the thing: yes, in the old days of 1997, 1996, 95, when I would teach, I would stand in front of the teenagers – I used to take 110 pills a day. These were vitamins, these were herbs, these were supplements, these were anything other than the antiretrovirals. I tried very hard not to get on AZT and whatever was available until I was sure that the meds that were available were going to work. So for 18 of the 26 years I’ve been infected, I did the holistic route to the disappointment of many of my doctors. I’d swallow a bag full of pills in front of the teenagers, and that alone would make my point. Now I

take two pills before bedtime. I’d get up to thirty-three pills and say, *you’re still not sure about this condom thing, right?* and these kids would be gasping. But now, they see that I’m healthy and I’m strong, and I don’t even look fifty, and I’m doing just fine. The new challenge for me is to get them to see that it’s still a difficult life – I’m working full-time to take care of myself. If you’re on your meds, and you’re adherent, and you’re compliant, and you’re undetectable, and you go to your doctor every three or six months to show that you’re *still* undetectable, and you don’t get reinfected, and you’re living a safe life, you fall into the category of ‘functionally cured.’

GC: So without that visual metaphor, what do you do?

SF: I tell them what it’s like now living with HIV. Like, I tell them that 90% of the time, when I go on a date, and I tell another guy that I’m infected, I’m going to get rejected because of HIV. They’re not rejecting me, they’re rejecting the virus. But nine out of ten times, that’s what happens. [Teenagers] don’t see that. They see a good looking guy with pecs and a tight t-shirt, they don’t get that I get rejected. They don’t get that I have to fight with my insurance company – even though we’re in the land of Obamacare – to make sure that I can pay the monthly premium and make sure that my drugs come on time. I can’t miss a day!

GC: Tell me a little bit about dating, while we’re on the subject. What’s been your experience as a poz guy?

SF: When I’m on Grindr or Scruff, I get one of five responses when I tell guys I have HIV. And I always tell. First, they block me. Second is, they’re there, the green light’s on, they just stop talking to me. The third response that I get is, ‘I don’t mess with that shit.’ The fourth response is frightening – I become an educator. They ask me the most basic questions. *Can you kiss? What can you and can’t you do?* Which just points out the egregious lack of comprehensive sex education in this country.

If there’s one point I want to make, it’s about that lack of education. Teenagers are learning about safer sex – or about sex at all! – from porn, or from Grindr and Scruff or other apps like that. They’re completely not learning it from the teachers whose job it is to teach them.

GC: You definitely have your work cut out for you. Who would you say are your biggest allies in your cause?

SF: My allies are the teenagers that I’ve taught, and they go off to college and join a sorority or a fraternity, or some club, and then they educate their friends, or bring me in to educate their peers. I’m trying to create an army of educators out there. If the adults, parents, teachers aren’t going to do it, I’ll get the kids to teach each other. They’re my allies. They’re the ones who are pushing to make something happen.

GC: How about adversaries?

SF: I get called into the principal’s office a lot. As a teenager, I would never get called in. As a public speaker, if I’m called into the office, I feel a sense of... I don’t know, a secret sense of glee. This is a good thing. I’m pissing somebody off because I talked about rimming, or I said the words ‘oral’ and ‘sex’ without some other words in between. On the one hand, I would say sometimes the ones who hire me are the ones who are against me, because they’re trying to tie my hands, but at the same time, I gotta point out that *they’re hiring me*. The ones who are against me are the ones who aren’t even getting me into classrooms. There are some parts of my country where I’ve never spoken, like Alabama, Montana, Arizona. I can’t break in, because there’s still a lot of abstinence-only education being taught in the States. 🌐



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