

# Birthday

*After two years as one of the highest profile AIDS carriers in Canada, Eric Smith says he no longer cares about his privacy. He just wants to educate people about the ongoing calamity of AIDS in any way he can.*

*By Dan O'Connell*



IT'S 11 P.M. ON A WINTRY TUESDAY night when Eric Smith walks into Rumours, a large, private club for gays and lesbians, located in the old Cove Theatre on Gottingen Street. It's Eric Smith's birthday. He's 31-years-and-11-hours-old. He's come to "the club" tonight because he's feeling restless.

Smith walks past the spot where he usually stands. On weekends, when the club is packed to capacity, people who have AIDS, or who have tested positive for the AIDS virus, often come to talk to Smith, to ask his advice and to seek his support and his strength. Tonight, however, Smith is off-duty. There are only 20 or 30 people scattered around the club, too few for anyone to risk approaching Smith with his problems. He can sit where he likes.

A few people exchange greetings with Smith, but most ignore him. The bartender, an under-employed school teacher, offers a huge, bright smile when she sees him, and this smile grows even wider when he tells her it's his birthday. The bartender immediately does the expected — she buys him a beer.

Smith says he's been so busy lately he almost forgot it was his birthday. Somehow that just doesn't ring true. He's clearly pleased by the bartender's well-wishing as well as by her hastily arranged present.

ERIC SMITH, OF COURSE, IS THE NOVA Scotia school teacher whose professional future became the subject of contentious political debate three years ago when word leaked out in his home town of Cape Sable Island that he carried the AIDS virus. Although he'd been a well-

regarded and popular teacher, the majority of parents in Cape Sable Island decided they didn't want him teaching their children anymore and they organized a campaign to keep him out of the classroom.

That created a problem, not only for the province's Department of Education but also for the entire Nova Scotia government. Regardless of the parents' complaints, Smith had a valid teacher's license and a legal contract with the Shelburne District School Board. After a nasty bit of public to-ing and fro-ing between Smith and the community, the provincial government finally stepped in with a political solution to what it saw as a political problem. It appointed a Nova Scotia Task Force on AIDS, and seconded Eric Smith to sit as a member.

The task force convened, held public meetings and then filed a final report in the fall of 1988. The task force's report embarrassed the Buchanan government, which refused to implement several key recommendations, including recommendations that AIDS testing be kept strictly anonymous and that the rights of people with AIDS be protected under the provincial human rights act. Smith, himself, angrily walked out of the press conference at which government officials announced they were rejecting those key recommendations.

After the task force ended its work, however, Smith accepted the provincial government's offer of a three-year appointment with the curriculum development branch of the department of education. Still officially on loan from his school board, Smith is now working as an advisor on AIDS education and other issues.



SMITH SAYS HE'S AT PEACE. "I'VE LOOKED AT all the possibilities and accepted what is probably going to happen," he allows as we share a beer in Rumours.

Smith is an asymptomatic carrier of the AIDS virus. That means he has the virus in his body, but, as yet, has no symptoms of any of the illnesses associated with AIDS. According to his own calculations, he had been infected for either six months or three years when he was tested in September 1986.

"Whichever of those [is right] depends on how you look at things. I think it was six months," he says, a wry smile wrinkling one side of his face.

Why does he smile?

"I find I do that quite often when I talk about the death part, or living longer than you're expected to, simply because people are afraid to bring up the topic. They don't want to force you to talk about it and you end up smiling to let people know it's not a problem."

One-third of all carriers become ill within five years. The percentage of carriers who become ill increases still further after six years, after seven years and after eight years. But there isn't a lot of information to go on. Blood stored from hepatitis surveys conducted in San Francisco in 1978 shows that two percent of the survey population carried the AIDS virus. Some of those infected people are still alive today, proving that some people can live with the virus for at least 10 years.

"But that doesn't say where they'll be in 15 years," Smith says. "You really can't base your future on the numbers because the samples are small, or because it's been assumed that's the way things will progress." He pauses. "I just have bad luck as a rule. It would be in character for me to get sicker quicker than most people do simply because I'm one of those with lots of bad luck."

ERIC SMITH SAYS HIS FAMILY'S UNWAVERING support has been an important source of strength for him in the three years since he learned he carried the AIDS virus. "I never had any problem with the family," he says. "I never experienced any of the negative things. I was lucky."

By the time he was 12 years old, Smith says he knew he was "different." When he was 14, he read a book that let him put a name on that difference, and he had his first homosexual experience at 16.

He was 22 years old when his mother told him she knew he was gay. It was during his third year of teaching on Cape Sable Island and he was out helping his mother with the shopping. He'd been spending a lot of time with his mother since she and his father divorced. She noticed the way he spoke to a friend and said, "You like him, don't you? I know how much you like him. I know exactly what you do on the weekends."

"So you know I'm gay?"

"I've known for a long time," she said.

"There I was, 22 years old, sitting in a shopping centre parking lot, all pumped up for an argument, and it wasn't there. My mother accepted it quickly."

Smith credits his octogenarian maternal grandmother for the atmosphere of tolerance in his family. She's a devout Baptist who, he says, "suffers from small-town syndrome." But she is also the glue that holds the family together.

Smith says the worst moment of his childhood was being caught smoking cigarettes when he was 12 years old. His parents were deeply disappointed and he was grounded for a month. That meant he couldn't go to his grandmother's house the next Sunday for a special family dinner. Without any prompting from Eric, his grandmother called his parents and said how pleased she'd be if Eric could attend the family dinner.

"That was it. My grandmother sprung me for the dinner and the grounding didn't last," he says.

Smith's relationship with his family was such that, by the time he was 23, he could bring his male friends home for the weekend and they would be treated as a couple in either his mother's or his father's home. "If you were sitting on the couch and snuggling up to each other, it was all right. You knew what the limits were.... My parents always encouraged me to be affectionate."

But Smith's parents also wanted him to be more like "everyone else." His parents were pleased, for example, when he had a two-year heterosexual relationship while attending the Nova Scotia Teacher's College in Truro. "My parents were rather thrilled there was a girl in my bed," he says.

This relationship didn't work out, but Smith still remembers it fondly. "She was very open-minded," he says. "We'd lie in bed and discuss the guys we'd seen walking across the campus and which ones appealed to each of us. I haven't heard from her in six or seven years but I still send Christmas cards to her parents and her grandparents. She's married now, so I don't visit anymore."

SMITH ADMITS HE HAS ISOLATED HIMSELF IN recent years. Ironically, since testing positive, he says he's become a sex object — and his sex life could be much more active now than before people knew him as the teacher with AIDS. He is, if you like, a star in the gay community. "I could get picked up any night I want to at the bar now," he says.

People assume he is going to take responsibility for protecting them and they won't have to go through all that talk about safe sex. Smith says his situation is comparable to that of a woman in a heterosexual relationship, where it's assumed she'll be the one responsible for taking precautions. "I listened to some of the women on the [Nova Scotia] task force [on AIDS] and they complained that birth control has always been left up to the woman — to take the pill and take responsibility. It's much the same thing. People want to know someone else is taking the responsibility for protection."

But that's not all. Some people think they are doing Smith a favor by offering some comfort. "If you turn them down, they get very upset. That's why you talk to them for a while to see where they're coming

from. I don't particularly want anyone going into the club and telling everyone how nice they were to me."

Smith says he can't deal with any sort of monogamous relationship. He says he is protecting other people. He had been spending time with someone who works for the provincial government when word first got out that he was an AIDS carrier. Smith stopped seeing the person for fear that the relationship might get that other person in trouble. He halted a second relationship because the other person started making noises about sharing an apartment.

"Usually they get upset because they don't see that I'm trying to protect them. I just sort of back away and I don't really explain. I fear that if I explain, I know they're going to disagree with what I'm saying and try to keep the relationship going. It's just as easy if I stop showing up. Then they can get mad at me and feel the relationship has come to an end."

Smith says a few of his friends back on Cape Sable Island found themselves in trouble within the community simply because they knew him. One woman, a representative for a cosmetics company, spoke on Smith's behalf at a public meeting. The company's head office had calls asking that she be fired. A second incident occurred in the Annapolis Valley. Smith has friends there who own a duplex where Smith stays when he visits them. After his story hit the media, however, the people who live in the other half of the duplex asked if they could get out of their lease.

Does Smith want to be in a relationship?

"Yes, I'd like to be in a relationship but I don't see that I would do it. I don't want to put anyone at risk."

**SMITH HAS CONSIDERED RUNNING AWAY,** moving to another city to escape his high public profile in Nova Scotia. He's had plenty of opportunities.

Just after his case became public, he was interviewed on CBC-TV's *The Journal*. A man in Seattle, Washington, who saw the item, called the CBC and asked that his name and phone number be passed on to Smith. About 20 minutes after the interview was aired, Smith got the message. When he phoned the man in Seattle, the man offered him a place in his home for as long as he wanted.

Similar offers have come from as far away as Bermuda and Florida as well as from other places in Canada.

"I've looked at it," Smith says. "There's no place in Canada I can go. I've been front-page news right across the country. Besides, I'm not the sort who can just say, 'The hell with it.' I admire people who just pack and move. I can't do that."

**ERIC SMITH SAYS HE'S NOT CONCERNED WITH** his own privacy anymore. He thinks the most constructive thing he can do is answer any question that is put to him.

"When this whole thing blew up, it was a matter of convincing people that I was honest. The best way to do that is answer anything they ask. If you want people to believe you, then you have to convince them you're not trying to hide anything."

Smith says what he really wants is the opportunity to continue educating people, but in a different way. He says that's why he accepted the three-year contract with the department of education.

"There are only a few of us who can talk about AIDS from the perspective of someone who's infected. It seems to work. It gives people a face to identify with. That's where I can do the most good. In doing so, you make it easier for those people who, unfortunately, will come after."

Smith admits he has become a one-issue person. He assesses all politicians by the way they respond to AIDS. He doesn't have many kind words for the present government.

"I want the government to act based on reality. They have gone to great pains to play down the numbers, so that AIDS is not going to be an issue for many people. We're probably looking at 2,000 to 4,000 people in the province who are already infected. It's easy to talk about 43 cases of AIDS, half of whom are dead. It's easy to talk about 24 [dead] people. It's a different thing entirely to talk about 2,000 to 4,000 infected people who are going to get sick over the next 15 years.

"It is to the government's advantage to play down the numbers. That way they don't have to give extra funding to the hospitals."

**SMITH SAYS DEALING WITH DEATH IS NOT A** big problem. After he tested positive, he had an in-depth, one-on-one session with each member of the family. And, yes, he has scripted his own funeral. It's not written down yet, but it is all "up here," he says, touching his temple with a forefinger.

"The family know the basics. After what's happened up home, I certainly don't want my funeral there. And the obituaries for AIDS patients usually say something like, 'He died from pneumonia or cancer.' I want mine to be explicit. I've got those questions answered, so they don't have to make the tough decisions. I can deal with it lying in a hospital bed.

"The question I worry about is what is it going to do to the rest of the family. I hope my grandparents, who are in their 80s, go before I do. Mother doesn't handle these things well."

**LEANING ACROSS THE TABLE AT RUMOURS,** Smith says, "It's interesting the number of people who talk to you at the club who will walk past you on the street. They won't take the chance of letting on they know who you are."

It is 2 a.m. on the morning after Eric Smith's birthday. After a few beers, he is prepared to admit that he isn't telling the truth when he says he has 10 years to live. He figures his death will come sooner than that. He says he tells people he will live for 10 years because people get very uncomfortable when he tells them he figures he'll be dead in three years.

"The conversation tends to just stop. People seem to be able to handle 10 years. They have a hard time when you say three."

Eric Smith is 31 years and 14 hours old. □