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Season of Opportunity

July 01, 2008 | Mitzi Bible

Jonathan Ervin is dying, yet he appears healthy. His doctors can't explain it, except to say there must be a reason he's still alive.

Ervin, a 1983 Liberty alumnus, has AIDS. And while most AIDS patients with very low T-cell numbers are ill and bedridden (T-cells are healthy cells that protect the immune system), Ervin, 46, has been able to work, attend church and do most anything else healthy people do. But he knows that could all change the instant he catches a bad cold or the flu. That's why he's using his time wisely to share his story of God's forgiveness.

"It's amazing that God is sustaining me for a season for His purpose," Ervin said in March.

"Jonny," as friends call him, grew up the son of a preacher in Memphis, Tenn. He earned an associate's degree in religion from Liberty; his siblings Pam, Mike and Penny also attended LU.

He traveled through Europe with a student missions group and participated in music ministry. He always had a passion for music and longed to be a performer.

But those doors were shut many times, Ervin said. And God's the one who shut them.

"I've always sung and that was my dream; I wanted to make my living singing. But I had this secret place, a place I struggled in. When I look back over my life — I don't believe God would use an unclean vessel — doors that would almost open, shut. ... When I look back now, I know why."

The secret place

Throughout his life Ervin has "fasted, prayed, screamed, begged" for God to take away desires that, if he acted on them, would be sin.

“I first realized that I had same-sex attraction as early as second or third grade. Growing up in a preacher’s home, Christian school, Christian college, you can imagine how that would torment somebody who feels like they’re different.”

While some who live a homosexual lifestyle say it is natural to act on their desires, Ervin has always felt conviction.

“I knew what the Bible said about it. And it was in such conflict with my spirit — my spirit with God’s truth — and I just couldn’t accept it. But yet it was there.”

And he feels it was there since the beginning.

“I was never introduced to anything of the gay lifestyle. I had never seen pornography, nothing. I was never abused in any way. ... It was just there. When I say we’re all born into a sin nature, maybe that was mine.”

He suppressed those desires from time to time with God’s strength, but then gave in during the toughest moments in his life, such as after a divorce.

“Even though this was an area God has given me victory in, when I was down, depressed because of the divorce and hurting, that temptation came back [saying] ‘Walk with me and I can show you how to feel love, comfort, and all those things again.’ ... I went back and started dabbling in that again.”

For the most part, Ervin kept his homosexual past and his AIDS diagnosis a secret. Only a couple close friends and family members knew.

Then, one Sunday night last November, he shared his story with hundreds.

A public testimony

Ervin said he felt God asking him to go public a couple years ago.

“My first thought was, ‘Absolutely not, I’m not interested,’ and I just pushed it away,” he said.

“Over two years’ time, my mind became consumed with it. I would feel that in the morning when I woke up, at night when I went to bed, during my workday. So finally I said, ‘OK God, if you’re really in this, if you’re asking me to go public, [you’ve] got to prove it to me.’”

That proof came in a meeting with the Rev. Jonathan Falwell in August 2007.

“I told him what had gone on behind closed doors. Without any hesitation he immediately said, ‘Maybe God wants you to speak.’ ... It was confirmation. I just shivered [and thought] ‘Oh my gosh, this really was you [God].’”

So on Nov. 18, 2007, Ervin shared his testimony (a sit-down video interview with Charles Billingsley) at Thomas Road Baptist Church and sang a song about God’s forgiveness.

At the end of the service, Falwell called him back on stage for a prayer. When it was over, Ervin turned to Falwell.

“I’m up there thanking him [Falwell] for the opportunity and he said, ‘You don’t need to talk to me right now, there’s a lot of people that want to speak to you.’ So I looked down and there was a sea of people, all the way to the back of the church.”

Ervin’s son Shaun, 20, a rising sophomore at Liberty, was there to watch his dad’s first public testimony.

“I was amazed at how responsive they were to his story and how compassionate everyone was,” Shaun Ervin said. “With something like that, I was just on pins and needles the whole time. But everything went according to God’s plan.”

Although he said it was hard to face the news of his dad’s former homosexual lifestyle and AIDS, he has come to have respect for his changed life.

“I really admire the stand for Christ that he is taking publicly,” he said.

The confession didn’t hurt their father-son bond, he said.

“It hasn’t really changed, if anything it may have brought us a little bit closer.”

A friend to the end

Sandy Bradshaw first met Ervin about 15 years ago, through her daughter who worked with him.

“The first time I met him he asked me if I would be his ‘Lynchburg Mama.’ He said his family lived in Memphis and he needed a mom here,” she said. “We have been very close friends ever since. I talk to him almost daily — he calls me early in the morning and we have coffee together on the phone.”

It was Bradshaw who encouraged him years ago to get a routine physical. Like a good son, he heeded her advice. While there, he requested an HIV test, “just to rule it out.”

Two weeks later the doctor called. The test was positive.

“I was in such denial, [and said] no, you’ve mixed that up with somebody else’s blood and we’ll just do it again,” Ervin said.

But it was real. And not only did he test positive for HIV, but the numbers were already low enough to have done damage.

“HIV infects the body and starts turning off, one by one, each T-cell. When that number gets down to 200, you’re clinically diagnosed full-blown AIDS.”

A normal count (for someone without HIV) is 800-1200, he said. His first count was 400 and has declined since. At his most recent appointment in May, it was 39.

“My nurse in the office just says, ‘You’re a walking miracle.’”

Ervin said he tried the HIV medications to help sustain his life, but they made him very sick so he chose not to take them.

“I made a decision that I wanted quality of life over time,” he said.

And that’s where his friendship with Bradshaw may mean more than ever.

“The amazing thing about all this,” she said, “is I’m a hospice nurse.”

“I have to think this whole meeting [with Ervin] was by God’s design because God knew even before I met Jonathan what his future held. I will certainly be an active participant in his care, to the end of his life.”

Bradshaw, a member of the TRBC choir and a nurse for more than 40 years, said she feels at peace with the situation.

“That is not to say that I will not be upset and miss him terribly, but when God is finished with Jonathan on this earth — I truly believe He’s leaving him here to share with more people and bring them to Christ — I’m OK to let him go.”

And she’s a proud Mama.

“Since he’s been diagnosed, he’s made a complete turnaround. He obeyed the call and I admire him for doing what he’s done. He’s not just talking the talk, Jonathan is living the good life now.”

Making a difference

From her position as a registered nurse in Lynchburg’s Infectious Disease Center, Ave Connealy sees AIDS patients every day. Jonathan Ervin, she said, is different.

“Most patients are very reluctant to step out and let their name be known, or their face even. The fear of being exposed is big for them,” she said.

Connealy, who has become friends with Ervin, came to see him sing at Liberty in February.

“If his life can speak and say to others that they don’t have to stay in the lifestyle they are living and there is hope in Christ, then his life is making a difference,” she said.

At that same service, Ervin said a girl told him about a friend struggling with homosexuality and wanted to know if Ervin could help.

Ervin has given his e-mail address to anyone who asks and welcomes invitations to sing and tell his story. (*Write Jonathan at JonathanErvin@aol.com. To hear Jonathan's testimony and song, go to <http://jonathanervin.com>*).

In the past few months Ervin has received many e-mails and cards, some from people who have not dealt with HIV or homosexuality, but have been impacted by his story nonetheless.

A woman in her 20s visited Ervin near Christmastime at the Lynchburg salon where he works as a hairdresser. She had been a customer of his, but she wasn't someone he remembered particularly. She immediately hugged him, gave him a card and left. He read it later; it said that someone had e-mailed her his testimony and it touched her.

"She said, 'I was ready to tell my husband I didn't love him anymore, ready to end my marriage.' She said, 'Here I was ready to toss all this away,'" Ervin recalls. After seeing his testimony, the woman wrote she had realized life "is really about your family and your relationship with God" and she changed her mind.

It's obvious Ervin is blessing others with his story. But, in turn, he is being blessed. He is able to perform Christian music now — what he always wanted to do.

"It's kind of ironic how all this has come full circle," he said. "I love performance, love being on the stage, love being in front of people, but now it's a whole new focus."

Ervin said he has made friends since his first testimony and his old friendships are even stronger. But many would think Ervin has one foe — the disease that is eating away at the cells that are supposed to keep his body healthy.

But even that is not true.

"This is a trite statement but I can say it from my own life: God is certainly too kind to ever hurt you, too wise to ever make a mistake. I share in my story AIDS has become the greatest blessing in my life — absolutely."