

# ST. CHARLES JOURNAL

## Life with HIV Youth advocate spreads awareness of the disease

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Josh Pillman has lived with HIV since he was born, but he wants to be viewed as a normal boy.

He participates in activities popular among other 13-year-olds.

He used to frequently ride his four-wheeler, but since doctors have considered it a high-impact activity, he has settled for riding his bike and doing other things. "I like to swim and play a little bit of tennis, too. I like reading fantasy adventure books," Josh said, as he sat in a swivel chair and read a "Star Wars" book.

His mother, Jean Pillman, was in a serious car accident in April 1984. She pulled onto an interstate in Madison County and was hit by a tractor-trailer. Her Ford Pinto had no seatbelts. She was ejected from the car and the truck ran over her.



*Roy Sykes photo -- Josh Pillman, 13, and his mother, Jean Pillman, talk about what it's like to have HIV. Josh was born with the disease.*

She said she doesn't remember being run over, but several witnesses confirmed it. She now uses a wheelchair.

Undergoing several skin grafts and other surgeries, she also received a vital blood transfusion while in the hospital. Nearly 10 years later, she found out she was given blood that was HIV positive. She was two months pregnant with Josh.

Doctors took a blood sample and ran a customary test to determine if she was HIV positive. The first test came back negative. Without her knowledge, doctors ran a second test.

"I was a healthy person. I didn't have any illnesses," she said. "I thought, how is this possible?"

At the time, Jean Pillman and her husband, Patrick Pillman, lived in Germany and were stationed there for Patrick's military assignment.

In the early 1990s, doctors told Jean Pillman there was a 50 percent chance her son would have HIV. She said doctors suggested she have an abortion.

"That was not an option for us," she said.

When Josh was born, doctors immediately began giving him oral medication, and when he was just 6 weeks old, they detected HIV. Jean Pillman said recent research has shown that having a baby through Caesarean section rather than natural birth is less traumatic for a baby that has HIV, and it spreads less infection. She also said medicine now is given intravenously instead of orally.

"Babies can test a false positive because they are carrying their mother's antibodies," Jean Pillman said. "Sometimes they'll keep testing until their second birthday."

Josh has never been off medicine. He used to take his medicine about four times a day. Now Josh takes his medicine twice a day - at 10 a.m. and 10 p.m.

"We have a cell phone alarm to remind us," Jean Pillman said.

School has been a tough issue for the family. Josh attended public school when he was in kindergarten and first grade, but now he is homeschooled. School officials at Independence Elementary in the Francis Howell School District had questioned Josh's doctor when Josh was missing school for weeklong periods. The Pillmans didn't want anyone at the school to know Josh had HIV. They were worried students and staff wouldn't understand the virus and rumors would be spread.

"No one needed to know that," Jean Pillman said. "He took the universal precautions."

Now, Josh publicly speaks about the issue. He travels the United States telling his story and educating others about life with HIV. He's ready to go back to public school; his parents are hesitant. Jean Pillman worries her son could be more susceptible to catching other illnesses, because the HIV compromises his immune system.

As Josh gets older, Jean Pillman said she's also concerned that other students will judge her son and think he has been "sexually promiscuous."

Both Jean and Josh Pillman have HIV that is "undetectable." Medicine they take works well on them both, and the HIV strand is weak now, Jean said.

The Pillmans have two adopted children, Isabella and Isaiah, both 4. Isaiah also was born with HIV. Jean and Patrick Pillman said they adopted an HIV-positive child because "it was what we knew how to deal with."

Unfortunately, Jean and Patrick Pillman have to sell their home in Weldon Spring because health insurance costs total more than \$1,000 each month. After Gov. Matt Blunt made cuts to the state's Medicaid program in 2005, the family lost their coverage.

Jean Pillman said the family is thankful for **Food Outreach**. The St. Louis organization gives food to families affected by HIV and AIDS that struggle to make ends meet. Josh planned to speak today to guests as the co-chairman at an annual fundraising auction and meal, "A Tasteful Affair." He said he enjoys being a youth advocate.

"I want other kids to know about it," he said. "I want to tell them what it's like to have it as a kid. As an adult, sometimes you have more choices."

Josh said most of his close friends understand HIV, and he has no problem telling groups of more than 1,000 about his disease.

"You can't get HIV from being a friend, and a lot of people think you can get it by just being near someone, but you can't," he said.

He plans to spend another summer in Wisconsin at Camp Heartland, a program for children affected by or infected with HIV or AIDS.

Recently the television show "Extreme Home Makeover" renovated a new family camp in New York. Josh said it was "cool" being taped for the show while at camp. The episode will air during the show's season finale. Josh said he realizes his life might be different than other people's because he has HIV.

"I've had to grow up really fast, but I can still be a kid," he said.