

The Power of Children: Making a Difference

Script for Ryan White: *Hope is a Habit*

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Context: This scene takes place in Ryan's bedroom in his family home in suburban Indiana in February of 1988.

Character Description: Ryan White is sixteen years old.

Materials/Props: notebook and a pen, Elton John poster or other artifacts on display in the bedroom setting, a friendship bracelet is worn by Ryan. A bed or chair is in the room that Ryan sits upon.

PROGRAM/ACTIVITY SCRIPT:

Throughout the piece, Ryan has his "speech" persona and the more casual side that he shows to his friends.

(Offstage) Yeah, mom, I'm going to work on the speech now. Don't worry about it!

(Enters)

Hey everybody, I'm glad you made it! Welcome to my room! What do you think—pretty cool, right? Make yourselves comfortable, and thanks for coming over to help me practice my speech. Trust me, I'm going to need all the help I can get. I mean, I get scared just giving a book report to the class, and this is a speech to the President's Commission on AIDS. The President himself may even be there! Man, I'm in major trouble.

So, do you want to hear what I've got so far? Okay. Here goes nothin'.

(Picks up a spiral bound notebook and shifts into speech persona. He addresses the "commission".)

My name is Ryan White. I am sixteen years old. I have Hemophilia, and I have AIDS.

(Sighs)

Dudes, this is hard. I'm really worried that I won't say the right things. But enough wasting time; practice makes perfect. . . okay . . . here we go, again.

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(Shifts back into speech persona and addresses “commission.”)

My name is Ryan White. I am sixteen years old. I have Hemophilia, and I have AIDS. When I was three days old, the doctors told my parents I was a severe hemophiliac.

(Back to talking with friends.)

Man, I bet some of them won’t even know what hemophilia is. . . a lot of people don’t. Guess I’d better explain it, huh? *(thinking out loud)* See, normally when you get cut, your blood starts to clot in less than twelve minutes, and then pretty soon you have a scab and your cut begins to heal. But my blood takes thirty or forty minutes to clot, which is so slow that if I got cut I could bleed to death. Scary stuff.

Thank goodness, my mom let me do pretty much anything, anyway. A big reason why she was so easygoing was Factor VIII. Factor VIII is a medicine made from blood that thousands of people have donated. When a hemophiliac gets an injection of Factor VIII, his blood can clot —if he gets hurt, he can heal. I should tell them that too.

(Stands and addresses the “commission.”)

Despite the hemophilia, I led a pretty normal life. *(Stops reading)* That changed when I was thirteen and was diagnosed with AIDS. AIDS, which stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, is caused by a virus that gets in your blood and knocks out your immune system. So once you have AIDS, you start coming down with all kinds of other diseases, and eventually you die from them. One way the virus can get into your blood is from a transfusion or blood products like Factor VIII. That’s how I got it.

Given six months to live and being the fighter that I am, I set high goals for myself. It was my decision to live a normal life, go to school, be with. . . *(Starts coughing and has to sit down.)*

I hope that doesn’t happen when I’m giving my speech. Actually, it’d be a pretty cool way to get into talking about what being sick is like. Sometimes it’s a major drag. You get funny tasting white patches inside your mouth and have to rinse with some truly nasty liquid medication to prevent it from spreading. And AIDS takes away your appetite. Even your favorite foods smell awful—or your first mouthful will taste fine, and then your next one is like eating paste. My nose runs, and my chest feels tight, and it rattles when I breathe. There are weeks when I feel tired all the time and get cold constantly. Sometimes I’m afraid I’ll never feel well again.

But, you know what's even worse than the way AIDS makes you feel? The way other people make you feel about having it. Which leads me right back to my speech. . .

(Addresses the "commission" again.)

As I was saying, it was my decision to live a normal life and go back to school. But the school I was going to had no guidelines for a person with AIDS. The school board, my teachers, and my principal voted to keep me out of the classroom.

(Shifts back into talking to his buddies)

People were afraid they could catch AIDS from me if I coughed like I did a minute ago. They can't. It's perfectly safe to go to the same school as someone with AIDS or to kiss them or drink out of the same glass.

Still, we had to fight in court for nine months before they'd let me go to school. And then I had to follow all kinds of crazy rules. I couldn't participate in gym. And in the cafeteria, I had to use paper plates and plastic forks that could be "properly disposed of." And I had to use a private bathroom and separate water fountain.

Pretty soon some parents were asking, "Why would he have to do that if he's not contagious?"

Lots of the kids were so afraid they ran when they saw me coming and yelled, "Watch out! Watch out! There he is!" They made awful, mean Ryan White jokes, called me names, and they totally trashed my locker.

Fear got the better of everybody. They believed whatever they wanted to believe about me and AIDS. Some parents yanked their kids out of school.

And, then there was Easter Sunday. We got to the part of the service where everybody was supposed to say "peace be with you" and I held my hand out—to empty air! No one in the whole church wanted to shake my hand and wish me peace on Easter. Other people egged our house and let the air out of my mom's tires. Then, someone shot a bullet through our window.

That's when our lawyer, Mr. Vaughan, asked me if I wanted to quit fighting for my rights.

But I wanted to fight, to make sure that no other kid ever had to go through what I did. That's why I give speeches like this, and why I do all those television interviews, even though I think I sound and look like an even bigger jerk than I am.

I never wanted to be famous. It's embarrassing to be famous for being sick, especially with a disease like AIDS. Seriously, if I suddenly stopped being famous, I'd be so happy.

But, I do have to admit it's been totally awesome to meet some celebrities. The all time coolest one I've met is—*(pointing to a poster/picture)* Elton John. I always liked him because he wasn't afraid to be different. When they asked me on Good Morning America which celebrity I'd most like to meet, I said, "Elton John." Next morning he called! We've been friends ever since. He's even flown my whole family to a few of his concerts and he writes all the time.

(Picks up friendship bracelet and swings it front of the audience.)

And guess where I got this bracelet? You're not going believe it. This bracelet was a gift from Alyssa Milano —Sam from "Who's The Boss!" Seriously, I met her at a party in California. I told her she was my idol. Then, she took this bracelet right off her wrist and gave it to me. Wait, it gets better. When she left that night, she gave me a giant hug and a big kiss. Dudes, I almost fainted.

Lots of other celebrities have been really great, too. *(Uses 1980s memorabilia in the room to point them out)* Kenny Aronoff—the drummer who's played with John Mellencamp and Bon Jovi— he actually gave me a drumset! Greg Louganis, the Olympic diver, became a really good friend. I even got to hang out with Max Headroom! *(**adapt with props that are available**)*

But even after meeting all those famous people, I try to be as normal as possible. Once, this kid asked me, "Would you give up all your fame to get rid of AIDS?" *(Snaps his fingers)* Like that. I'd give it up like *that*.

AIDS can destroy a family if you let it. But through it all, Mom taught us to keep going. She always wants us to remember that we are doing something important—helping people by educating them. "Don't give up, be proud of who you are, and never stop hoping for the future." I've been doing that for so long now that hope is a habit. A habit I never want to break! I should write that down.

(Grabs notebook and jots it down.)

You know this speech is coming along better than I thought. And now, I'm getting to the good part.

(Addresses the "commission" again.)

At the end of the school year, we moved to Cicero. We did a lot of hoping and praying that the community would welcome us, and they did. Why? Because they had taken the time to learn the truth about AIDS.

(Shifts back into talking to his buddies.)

What Hamilton Heights High did was awesome. They called up the State Board of Health and got experts to come talk to everybody. First the teachers, then the students heard lectures and watched tapes and films about AIDS, and discussed it. And then all the kids went home and explained the facts about AIDS to their parents' so they'd understand too.

Everything is so much better here—all because people took the time to learn the truth and help pass it on. Having help like that is what keeps me going. *(pause)* Ok, I'm thinking about ending my speech something like this—drum roll, please . . .

(Ryan does a drum roll, both with his mouth and hands on the dresser, invites the audience to join in. Stands and addresses the “commission” again.)

Hamilton Heights High School is proof that AIDS education in school works.

(Slams the notebook closed and does a little eighties dance.) Yes! I'm finished, I'm finished!

Thanks for all your help everybody—I couldn't have done it without you. But, now it's time to celebrate. *(Calls offstage)* Mom, I did it! I wrote my speech. I'm done. Can we go to the mall? *(Exits)*

SUGGESTED FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- **How many of you knew about Ryan before seeing our exhibit today? And where did you learn about him?**
- **Based on what you heard today, and what you already knew, can anyone tell me what Ryan had to face that made his life different from our lives today? What did he have to go through that most kids today haven't lived through?**
- **After being discriminated against for being sick, Ryan made the decision to speak out and educate the public about AIDS and what it was like for him and others like him to live with this disease. Why do you think doing this was so important to Ryan? What was he trying to accomplish? What did he mean when he said “hope is a habit”?**

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