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**JANET AND RANDY CONNERS**

DECEMBER 27 1993 | JOHN DEMONT



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Randy Conners lay on a Halifax hospital bed, his AIDS-ravaged body shrunken to 108 pounds, his mind clouded by drugs, his desire to live virtually extinguished. It was November, 1992, and Janet Conners was convinced that her husband had given up. HIV-positive herself, she shared his sense of desperation. But she did not want him to abandon hope and decided to prey upon his greatest fear—facing death alone. “That’s it, I’m leaving you,” Janet threatened. “I want our son to have memories of a father, not a corpse dying a slow death.”

The tactic worked. Along with reserves of untapped strength, Randy found a renewed sense of purpose. Returning home, he embarked on a campaign to publicize his plight which last April won the Dartmouth, N.S., couple the first provincial financial compensation package for hemophiliacs infected with the HIV virus from tainted-

ed blood products. In doing so, they put the spotlight on another of the darkened avenues in the long journey to find relief for people carrying the deadly virus. Says Randy, 37: “We proved that two ordinary people can make a huge difference.”

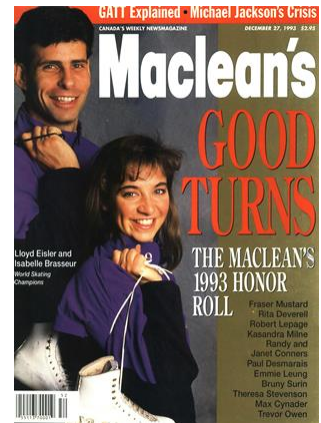
A Fight For Life

Then again, their lives have never been ordinary. Randy, a severe hemophiliac, had spent his formative years in and out of hospitals. But in 1976, he discovered Factor VIII, a blood product which provided him with a vital clotting component that let him lead a nearly normal life. But 10 years later, a doctor’s test revealed that Conners, by then a systems analyst for the federal government, was HIV-positive. He had contracted AIDS through a tainted blood product. Three years later, in 1989, Janet also learned that she shared the same fate.

They were devastated—but also angry. Faced with only promises of possible future government compensation for tainted blood victims, Randy declared: “That

wasn’t good enough. I could have died before anything was done.” Above all, he wanted to ensure that Janet, 37, and their son Robert, 13, had sufficient income after he died. So, the couple launched a publicity campaign worthy of the most astute political strategist.

All told, they met three times with George Moody, then Nova Scotia’s minister of health. Between meetings, they held news conferences, conducted media interviews and captured the sympathy of the public with their simple eloquence. When Randy was admitted to hospital last March with AIDS-related pneumonia, the setback had one positive element:



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sity tuition for both Janet and their son. Since then, the rest of Canada's provinces have agreed to similar, though less generous, compensation.

The victory has transformed the Connenses into reluctant celebrities. The

province's Human Rights Commission honored them for their efforts to increase AIDS awareness. Moreover, the media appearances and speeches help take the couple's minds off the terrible inevitability of their own fate. Janet recently suffered from pneumonia, which she fears may be the first sign of full-blown AIDS. And Randy, although he has regained some weight, suffers from recurring pneumonia and arthritis. But, he says bravely: "I used to worry that when I died no one would remember me. Now, I know that no matter what happens, Janet and I will have left a mark."

JOHN DeMONT

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