

Tackling DEMONS

AFTER ENCOUNTERING DESPERATE STRUGGLES WITH HIS HEALTH, FORMER NFL PRO ROY SIMMONS WANTS TO TELL EVERYONE HOW HE FOUND HEALING **BY BOB ADAMS**

When Roy Simmons arrived at Martha's Vineyard Holistic Retreat in May 2003, he only vaguely resembled the muscular, 290-pound pro football player who had competed with the Washington Redskins in the Super Bowl in 1984. His weight, though roughly the same, was now more linked with fat than with muscle. He had skin lesions on his back and chest. He barely had enough energy to climb a single flight of stairs at the Vineyard Haven, Mass., clinic.

And although he was managing his HIV infection—diagnosed in 1997—through antiretroviral therapy, Simmons's overall health was so visibly poor that a friend of nearly 25 years, Jimmy Hester, **[REDACTED]** prodded the former National Football League pro to enroll in a 21-day detoxification and lifestyle modification program, which he had recently completed himself.

Today, roughly nine months later,

Simmons, 47, looks almost nothing like the man who first shuffled into the holistic clinic, says Roni DeLuz, a registered nurse, naturopathic doctor, and founder of the center. He dropped more than 20 pounds during the detoxification program and nearly 60 pounds total. His skin problems have cleared up. And his energy level has risen to the point where he not only exercises daily but also is getting into more heavy workouts, including lifting weights and two- to three-mile runs.

DeLuz says Simmons's improved health is not just beneficial to his overall well-being but also helps in his battle against HIV. A less-toxic environment in the body makes it more difficult for HIV to thrive, she says, and it also enables the body to devote less energy toward addressing the harmful effects of the toxins and divert it instead to fighting the disease.

But Simmons's healing is not solely physical. He says that over the past year he has grown healthier in mind and spirit as well. Today, Simmons is

finally at peace with himself, his homosexuality, and his HIV infection—so much so that he has decided to put himself into the public spotlight to speak on a number of AIDS- and health-related issues, particularly the health regimen he says changed his life.

"It's tough to be so public—I've always been a very private individual—but part of the slow death I was entertaining was about not being honest and straightforward," Simmons says. "But when you get something good, you pass it on."

Learning a New Game

The "something good" Simmons has pledged to pass on is largely centered on the holistic lifestyle he adopted at the Martha's Vineyard clinic. For the former football pro, that meant fundamentally changing nearly every aspect of his life—especially what he ate. "I'm from the South, and I love to eat," he says. "Macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, corn bread, opossum, coon—I've eaten all that."

Simmons now plans to talk about his health regimen, safer sex and HIV prevention, and the dangers of the down-low life. "Love yourself," he says.

But eating, it turns out, was a very loose concept at the holistic retreat, where for three weeks Simmons was given no solid food at all. Instead, his meals consisted of supplement-laden drinks, herbal teas, vegetable broths, juice made from a mixture of fresh vegetables, and water.

"We use a liquid diet because it works best for detoxifying the body and for colon therapy," DeLuz says. "When you detoxify, all your vital organs get a rest so your energy can go toward healing."

An all or mostly liquid and supplements diet is generally safe for HIV-positive adults as long as it provides the recommended daily amounts of necessary nutrients, says Michael Gottlieb, MD, an HIV specialist at Synergy Healthcare Medical Associates in Los Angeles. "But there can be a danger if it's taken to extremes or involves any lean body mass loss in a patient who is already underweight" or fighting AIDS-related wasting, Gottlieb says.

Cade Fields-Gardner, director of the Cutting Edge, a Chicago-area HIV nutrition company, and a columnist for *HIV Plus*, adds that an extended all-liquid diet that is too low in calories could also create fat-loss problems for those struggling with or at risk for lipodystrophy. This is especially true, she adds, for people with other lipodystrophy risk factors, such as smoking or drinking, a low baseline CD4-cell count, or a high baseline viral load.

Oxygenated water is part of the retreat's emphasis on using oxygen to detoxify the body, which is the clinic's primary goal. For HIVers, an oxygenated body can help slow HIV disease progression, according to DeLuz.

A 2003 study in the journal *Pathophysiology* suggests that oxygen does have health benefits. In addition to promoting feelings of wellness and boosting energy and alertness, oxygen plays a role in helping wounds heal, according to the study. Oxygen deficiencies also have been linked with fatigue and poorer immune function. Gottlieb, however, says he is skeptical whether oxygenated products, particularly drops for drinking water, can offer any specific health advantages for HIVers.

The Daily Scrimmage

For Simmons, the detoxifying meal program at the clinic consisted largely of four key supplements—an antioxidant containing berry concentrates, concentrated vegetable compounds, a liquid supplement to promote bone and joint healing, and aloe vera.

Additional supplements included an acidophilus-containing probiotic to replenish bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract, enzyme capsules, antioxidant tablets, and oxygenating powders mixed with water. Another key part of Simmons's diet was a daily "live juice" made from combinations of vegetables. "Juicing gives you the maximum nutrition with easy digestion," DeLuz

says. "It's a way to detoxify, but it's also a way to feed."

Fields-Gardner agrees that juicing does offer nutritional benefits. "Someone who doesn't eat a lot of fruits or vegetables," she says, "tends to get a more concentrated amount of nutrients if they juice them."

Detoxification during the clinic regimen also was completed through exercise, colon therapy (commonly called a colonic or colon hydrotherapy), ear coning (a process to remove pollutants and toxins from the inner ear), and sauna sessions, Simmons says. An intravenous infusion of vitamins, tailored to the specific nutritional and health needs of each clinic patient, is also offered at the end of the 21-week session.

After three weeks at the holistic center Simmons had shed 20 pounds; Hester, 21. Both say they had increased energy, heightened mental clarity, and an overall healthy feeling that was so visibly apparent that Hester's doctor decided to go through the program himself.

"I've seen a lot of clinical progress in him," says Alberto Martinez, MD, who practices in the El Paso, Tex., suburb of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Martinez says he is considering having his future HIV patients go through the same sort of process before he begins antiretroviral therapy for them.

Gottlieb also sees no reason why HIV-positive people should not adopt a holistic health regimen if they choose

to—as long as the program provides adequate nutrition. But he cautions that it should not be a substitute for medical treatment of HIV disease—which can also boost overall healthy feelings by suppressing virus in the body, he says. “You should never substitute a holistic regimen for [highly active antiretroviral therapy],” he notes.

Simmons will not reveal whether he is on a HAART regimen or not because he says he does not want to give the impression that he is dispensing medical advice.

Striving for Game Condition

Today, several months after attending the retreat, Simmons has

merged traditional health care with the holistic regimens he learned at the clinic. Both he and Hester take supplements as well as a protein shake and live juice each day. Their meals consist of salads, steamed vegetables, grilled or baked fish, brown rice, and other healthful choices. Red meat, alcohol,

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THE WHOLE NINE YARDS

Elements of Simmons's Retreat Experience

Are Simply Good Health but Are Not Necessarily Simple

Roy Simmons's detoxification program is not simple or cheap—the supplements alone cost more than \$150 a month—but there are similar steps, says Roni DeLuz, a naturopathic doctor and founder of the Martha's Vineyard Holistic Retreat, to the ones that Simmons went through. Many of these, HIV specialists concur, are part of a pretty commonsense approach to general good health.

- Buy a juicer and drink a daily juice made from a variety of vegetables. “Juicing gives you the maximum nutrition. It's a way you can use to detoxify, but you also can use it to feed,” DeLuz says. Cade Fields-Gardner, director of the Chicago-area HIV nutrition firm the Cutting Edge, recommends that live juices be consumed right away and not refrigerated for later use so that their antioxidant capacity is not diminished by exposure to air.

- Eat berries and whole-grain products. These contain natural antioxidants and reduce the number of toxins entering the body, DeLuz asserts. Whole grains contain a number of fat-soluble vitamins, like A and E, as well as dietary fiber, Fields-Gardner notes. Berries can have anywhere from two to 20 times the antioxidant capacity of even antioxidant supplements, she adds.

- Eat fish whenever possible and cut back on red meat. “This keeps the diet as least stressful as possible,” DeLuz says. “When someone has a chronic illness you want to take away the foods that stress the body's systems.” Fish, particularly tuna and salmon, has large amounts of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids, Fields-Gardner adds. Red meat, though a key source of iron, is typically high in saturated fats. Go for leaner cuts, such as beef or pork tenderloin, and avoid fattier choices like filet mignon, she recommends.

- Exercise. Even rigorous walking is beneficial.

- Get plenty of sleep. DeLuz also recommends not eating less than three hours before bedtime to allow the digestive organs to properly rest during sleep.

- Drink plenty of water. Michael Gottlieb, MD, an HIV specialist, says adequate water intake can help prevent dehydration that may

occur in HIV-positive people suffering from chronic diarrhea. It also can flush out the kidneys and help prevent problems with kidney stones and kidney sludge.

- One controversial cornerstone of DeLuz's holistic practice centers on colon health. She urges colonics once a week or more and over-the-counter-type enemas for people who cannot afford the \$60 to more than \$100 per visit price tag for colonic irrigation. “Enemas are not going to hurt you,” DeLuz says. “They're going to help you by keeping you from reabsorbing toxins.”

But Gottlieb says there is no scientific evidence supporting the notion that toxins build up in the lining of the colon and must be artificially purged. “Why do people feel better after colonics and enemas? It's because there's some satisfaction, a sense of well-being, with elimination,” he says. But, he insists, the same can be accomplished through regular bowel movements.

- Perhaps the two most important steps to take when embarking on a new diet or exercise program, including the supplement-based regimen endorsed by the Martha's Vineyard holistic center, are to first consult with your HIV doctor and then partner with someone else adopting the same regimen. “Do it with a friend,” Jimmy Hester, Simmons's best friend, says. “I really can't emphasize this enough. Roy and I are there for each other every day, and some days that makes all the difference.”

—BOB ADAMS

YOU SHOULD KNOW

Enemas also are not appropriate for everyone and are typically contraindicated for people who have had recent colon or rectal surgery, have hemorrhoids, suffer from an unknown abdominal condition, have an irregular heartbeat, have suffered a heart attack, or who have cardiovascular disease. Women in advanced stages of pregnancy or who have recently delivered should check with their physicians before receiving an enema. In addition, research has shown that overuse of enemas can deplete the body of needed minerals, including potassium and key electrolytes.

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drugs, and coffee are avoided. Exercise continues to be important too.

The exercise and diet regimen can be tough, particularly for two self-proclaimed sugar and carbohydrate addicts, Simmons says. But it is not inflexible and does allow some room for variation—or what DeLuz calls “recreational eating.” Simmons and Hester say they are compliant with the program about 85% of the time, which is a level DeLuz says is sufficient, but they sometimes find the occasional doughnut, slice of pizza, or plate of pasta too hard to resist.

“But I realize it does absolutely nothing for me,” Hester says. “I’m aware more than ever that it’s not serving my body at all, so I’ll get back on it.”

In addition to the cravings, the health regimen also comes with significant costs. The 21-day detoxification program carries roughly a \$10,000 price tag; shorter stays range from \$450 for a two-night retreat to \$4,200 for a two-week wellness program. Simmons and Hester now spend \$150 a month or more on supplements from the holistic center. Additional vitamins, supplements, and procedures like colonics, and vitamin drips boost the costs significantly higher.

Hester is adamant, though, that the program is worth the money and that savings in other areas achieved through lifestyle changes easily help make up for the added costs. “Don’t

get fast food. Instead,” he says, “change your diet and get the supplements.”

Seeing the Entire Field

While cleansing and nourishing the body is perhaps the overriding concern at the retreat, another target for clients is stress reduction. “Stress is a toxin,” DeLuz says simply.

Scientific studies have shown, Gottlieb points out, that stress and other emotional and mental health problems can lead to faster disease progression [see “Is Every Day a Rainy Day?” *HIV Plus*, July 2003]. Depression has been linked with quicker onset of AIDS-related complications, and animal studies show stress to be associated with higher rates illnesses and death.

As it turns out, stress has been almost omnipresent in Simmons’s life. The former Super Bowler has struggled with self-doubt and destructive feelings, he says, from the time he was raped as an 11-year-old, through three periods of alcohol and drug addiction (the last two following his HIV diagnosis), to the years hiding his sexuality while growing up in the conservative South and playing football in the ultra-masculine NFL. He says he even contemplated suicide at one point.

Simmons, nicknamed “Sugarbear” while a student athlete at Georgia Tech University, also lived much of his adult life on the “down low,” having numerous relationships with women, including fathering a daughter with his high

school sweetheart, while secretly having sex—often unprotected sex—with men. It was a secret he closely guarded throughout his pro sports career.

“I’m a human being, and the guilt, the lies, the deception basically took its toll on my mind and spirit,” he says.

For Simmons, announcing publicly that he is gay, which he did during a 1992 *Donahue* episode, and speaking about being HIV-positive for the first time during World AIDS Day, 2003, have been so emotionally freeing that he plans to regularly talk about his health regimen, safer sex and HIV prevention, and the dangers of the down-low life. “Be honest,” he urges. “Stop spreading the disease. Have safe sex. Love yourself. Love yourself enough to not mistake passion for love and enough to protect yourself. Love yourself enough to want to live.”

And today, perhaps more so than during any other part of his life, Simmons proclaims he does want to live. “The future holds good things for me,” he nearly croons. “I’m clear. I have a clear conscience. Freedom fuels health. So now I want to pass on what I’ve learned over the past months to others. I hope to be a voice to help individuals stop running from themselves and embrace and love themselves.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SIMMONS, THE HOLISTIC RETREAT, OR THE SPECIFIC DIET AND SUPPLEMENT REGIMEN HE FOLLOWS, VISIT HIS WEB SITE AT WWW.SUGARBEAR.INFO.

CHEERING SQUAD: Nine months after attending the clinic retreat, Simmons returns with best friend Jimmy Hester to visit with clinic founder Roni DeLuz.

