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Commentary: The cure for HIV rides a bike

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As I watched Timothy Ray Brown mount his new red mountain bike, my parental instincts kicked in. What if he fell or couldn't stop or hurts himself in some other way? Frightened, I kept visualizing how the media would handle the story: "Timothy Ray Brown, the first person cured of HIV, dies," they'd say, "but not from HIV or cancer or his chemotherapy, stem cell transplant or other invasive treatments. Rather, he fell off his bicycle and succumbed to a severe head injury."

The answer for an HIV cure for the world lies within Timothy, somewhere. I'm aware some may criticize Timothy's riding a bike or going skydiving, bungee jumping, even driving a car. Yes, he's the first person to be cured of the world's most unrelenting disease, but what's even more important is he's a human being who wants to live life to its fullest.

"The Berlin Patient" is the name the media gave Brown. At the time, he was living in Berlin and wished to remain anonymous. Why the anonymity? Because Timothy couldn't believe it was true, he told us. He feared his cure was temporary and the HIV would return. After all, he said, it was only a year or so earlier that his leukemia had resurfaced. Of course, eventually the media learned his name.

On Feb. 20, Timothy celebrates the sixth anniversary of the procedure that led to his cure.

As many of you know, I'm the founder and Chad Johnson is the co-founder of the World AIDS Institute (WAI), established to document and preserve the global history of AIDS, inspire action today to improve the lives of people living with HIV and AIDS (and their family, friends, and communities) and strengthen the spectrum of innovative initiatives to find a cure.

Timothy is co-founder of WAI and founder of the Timothy Ray Brown Foundation of WAI that Chad and I helped launch eight months ago. The Timothy Ray Brown Foundation is the world's first organization in the 31-year history of the AIDS epidemic whose sole mission is to find a cure for HIV.

Let me tell you a story. A few months ago, I was having lunch with Timothy when he said — in a burst of outrage — he wanted to go to the top of the Empire State Building and tell the world about the injustices people living with HIV face on a daily basis. Timothy vowed he would use his energy to make this right.

I told Timothy that I understood his anger and frustration, but felt diluting our message - finding a cure - might be counterproductive. "I think not," he said, pointing out he had been HIV positive twice as long as he has been cured. Then he looked at me the same way he did months ago when he told me he was launching an organization to find a cure. His plan was to announce it during the 19th International AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C. He asked us to help him.

The day before we were to launch the Timothy Ray Brown Foundation, we hosted a reception with Speaker Nancy Pelosi at the Library of Congress. I remember seeing her aide whisper to her that Timothy was at the other end of the room. It would be the first time they would meet. Immediately, she started toward Timothy. As they met in the middle of the room, she looked him in the eyes and said, "You are miracle. You are a miracle." Then they embraced. She held onto him for a long time as if his energy would help heal the wounds of the hundreds of people in her California district who had died from AIDS, many of them her friends.

It is true: Timothy Ray Brown may be a miracle. But he also is a human being. And if he wants to ride his new red mountain bike, he should do it as fast and as far as he wants. Timothy Ray Brown, the first person in the world cured of HIV, wants to live life to the fullest.

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