10 Unsung Heroes

Proof you needn’t snag an Oscar or Cabinet post to help fight the good fight

May 1, 2004 By Staff

From a get-tough Virginia grandma launching her own AIDS center to a California dude forging fellowship for positive Buddhists, these 10 dynamos toil beyond the headlines and flashbulbs—and even behind enemy lines. Scouring the country, *POZ* found an abundance of medal-worthy warriors with HIV, undecorated and undaunted. We wish we could honor all 100 finalists here, but we salute every HIVer who risks and sacrifices for others. May they inspire us all. And soon.

CLEANING UP
Yolanda Cannon | 42
Milwaukee
Tested positive: 1984

Docs recently told Yolanda Cannon that her legs may not hold out much longer. But her falls, diabetes and three-week hospital stay haven’t slowed her crusade. “My mother had six kids,” Cannon says. “Five of us got AIDS. I’ve already lost two brothers and a nephew.” So she keeps knocking on doors, toting two bags—one holding pamphlets and condoms, the other cleaning supplies. (“I’ve got to give them something for free,” she says, “to get inside their homes and start a safer-sex conversation.”) Talking to teens is her passion, but she also works the adult angle—getting the AIDS Resource Center to focus on her ’hood, say, and black pastors to preach the condom gospel. Now Cannon cochairs the African-American Task Force on HIV/AIDS. Says Neil Willenson, founder of Camp Heartland, an oasis for HIV-affected kids, including Cannon’s 14-year-old son, “I consider her the Larry Kramer of Milwaukee.”

--Jennifer Block

THE PROFESSOR
ROY PAULSON | 60
Hoffman, Minnesota
Tested positive: 1984

Norman Rockwell meets HIV: Retired teacher Roy Paulson lives on a Minnesota farm with his golden retriever, Pepper. He taught preteens for 31 years—and for the past 20, he’s been schooling America’s heartland on HIV. “The epidemic is a real problem here,” he says, “whether

people want to admit it or not." Paulson's activism began with classroom talks on bullying and sex ed. He says, "Kids will learn about sex.... It's up to us to teach responsibility." The town had a pretty good idea he was gay, he says. After getting HIV, he didn't see any point in denying that, either, especially if being out could help others. Linda Brandt, founder of Rural Aids Action Network, says of Paulson, an active member, "To be openly HIV positive and openly gay in this area is unbelievably courageous." Paulson says too many gays leave for the big city: "I love wide, open spaces. We should be able to live in rural areas without fear."

--Rebecca Minnich

DRAG RACER
Clyde McHone | 42
Oklahoma City
Tested positive: 1993

Clyde McHone still can't lure Oklahoma City's Baptist mayor into a wig, but he's dolled up many other locals for Turnabout, his drag fundraiser for Winds House, a nearby HIVer shelter. McHone (a.k.a. Julianne Fryes) has raised $50K over the past 20 years, emceeing the gala at the club Angles, where he once bartended. By day, he's persuaded fellow sales reps to give gifts to the shelter instead of one another; by night, he mentors the up-and-glamming, including his 15-year partner, Ray Robertson. "I had to woo him onstage with buttless undies," McHone recalls, "but once I did, there was no stopping him." McHone also sweet-talked Angles' timid owner, Tom, into performing—he belted out a Babs tune, dedicating it to McHone. "When we started Turnabout," McHone recalls, "I didn't know much about HIV, but I knew I wanted to help." Sometimes AIDS advocacy is a real drag.

--JB

SISTER D-I-Y
EVETTE THOMAS | 44
Hampton, Virginia
Tested positive: 1991

When her only local AIDS-services organization (ASO) went broke in spring 2003, Evette Thomas had a Eureka! moment: "We have to take care of ourselves." Thomas mobilized other HIVers to launch their own, set to open in early 2005. First, her team drafted a wish list—including services the old ASO never offered, such as acupuncture referrals and massage. The toughest part was getting funds and nonprofit status. Thomas is studying business administration—and had a veteran grant writer and HIV-outreach worker aboard—"but, Lord," she says, "it was a struggle." The National Organization for the Advancement of Hispanics let her work under its nonprofit banner. Thomas, who lives with her daughter and 3-year-old grandson, plans to name the project Adeyemi Bey, after her best friend who died of AIDS. "Finally," she says, "we're going to get somewhere."

--RM

SONG OF LIFE
MICHAEL MAFFEI | 51
Buffalo, New York
Tested positive: 1990

When ’80s health guru Louise Hay called AIDS a gift, Mike Maffei remembers thinking, *This woman is fucking nuts!* He’s since realized that though far from the perfect present, “AIDS *was* the instigator for getting my life together.” These days, Maffei may have more song recordings than CD4 cells, but he and his partner, Kyle, are still going strong after seven years together—an unimaginable landmark during Maffei’s hell-raising days. His diagnosis kicked his ass into both songwriting and activism: He did turns on local TV as an “AIDS survivor” and began organizing gay-pride events. Now educating schoolkids about HIV, Maffei is open about his status offstage and on—which costs him the occasional gig. And while little about his first album, *Consequences of Desire*, is HIV-specific, a portion of sales go to regional ASOs, giving fellow HIVers something to sing about.

--JB

TAKE A CHANTS
KEVIN RUES | 52
Santa Monica, California
Tested postive: 1986

A nightclub may seem an unlikely route to Buddhist enlightenment. But that’s where HIVer Kevin Rues began—three years after his doctor had given him six months to live. “I was living by the beach, running up bills I never thought I’d have to pay,” he recalls. In a gay bar, a friend suggested the Buddhist chant nam myoho renge kyo to ease his depression. “It sounded like a load of crap,” Rues says. “Then I tried it.” He found a spiritual home in the Buddhist group SGI, but when he shared his HIV status in 1990, he learned that even Buddhists can be bigots. Rues helped start SGI’s first gay and lesbian meetings, and HIVers soon materialized. Buddhist leaders lent support, and Rues began enlightening SGIers about his struggles with HIV and “how Buddhist practice had given me hope.” Longtime member Ken Saragosa says, “It was Kevin who made it possible to be out as gay and positive in SGI.” Enchanting.

--RM

STAND & DELIVER
TRACY FRANCISCO | 37
Coon Rapids, Minnesota
Tested positive: 2002

After her diagnosis, Tracy Francisco relapsed into alcoholism, lost her job and slit her wrists. She ended up in a psych ward, where a health “expert” spewed HIV lies. “I’d never revealed myself in front of anybody,” says AIDS educator Francisco, “but when a peer asked if you could get HIV from

sharing a spoon and the woman said yes, I stood up." The Red Cross soon certified her as a myth-basher. Says colleague Andy Ansell of the Minnesota AIDS Project, where Francisco rebounded, "I've never encountered someone who embodies more of the courage it takes to turn the shock of a diagnosis into empowerment." Touring schools, Francisco talks survival, safety and hope; at home, she makes sure her three teenagers play safe. "I have condoms *everywhere*," she says. "If my kids and their friends want one, they know they don't have to ask."

--JB

WELCOME WAGON
RICARDO ZELAYA | 38
Oceanside, California
Tested positive: 1991

Health-insurance red tape is baffling in English—imagine how it ties up Spanish- speaking HIVers. And language is the least of it. "Providers don't understand the quandary of immigrants," Ricardo Zelaya says. "We're stuck between immigration law and HIV." That's why Zelaya commutes two hours a day to San Diego and Our Place, the program he cofounded last year. "My clients are Latinos, immigrants—some documented legally, some not, some black, some white—all with families, stigma and depression." Ever since his own diagnosis, Zelaya has been on the front lines. He did AIDS ed with migrant workers and syringe ex–change with drug users. He even got in trouble for being too helpful—offering pills from his own prescription to an addict starting HAART. His then-bosses chided him for believing the client. Zelaya says, "I neither believe nor disbelieve. People ask for help, and I try to give it to them."

--RM

ALPHA MALE
DUANE QUINTANA | 25
Boise, Idaho
Tested positive: 1999

In college, Duane Quintana dreamed of becoming a youth pastor—until one hell of a freshman year. He came out as gay, tested positive and fled from church life, severely depressed. After zigzagging around the West for a year, Quintana returned home to found Allies Linked for the Prevention of HIV and AIDS (ALPHA), Boise's only downtown AIDS resource. "You walk into ALPHA and it's like you're walking into somebody's house," says Travis Riggs, his husband since August. ALPHA's 60 volunteers help spread Quintana's word. "Whether spiritually or socially, I'm interested in helping people—especially youth—be happy with who they are," Quintana says. His documentary, *I'm Just Me Just Like You*—about his HIV disclosure—airs in classrooms and on TV. And with a book on his pos-neg relationship in the works, Quintana is likely to land a place in the safe-sex canon.

--JB

RUBBER SOUL
ELLERY GARDNER | 45
Shreveport, Louisiana
Tested positive: 1986

Shreveport has riverboat casinos and Cajun cooking—but New Orleans it ain't. "I'm an openly HIV positive, gay man in this town, and there aren't many," Ellery Gardner says. Unsafe sex, however, is common—as neighbors confessed to him. Gardner says, "Most of the black population attends church but they don't want to talk about AIDS there." In 1999, congregants feared his lips on the communion cup. After five years of coaxing elders to preach HIV ed, he celebrates each sign of progress. A nurse's aide with a public-health degree, Gardner saw it all while caring for HIVers in the '90s. The National Catholic AIDS Network's Josette Foster says, "His work with churches can be a real struggle, but he never gives up." From gay bars to housing projects, rehabs to juvie, "they call me the rubber guy," Gardner says.

--RM

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/10-Unsung-Heroes-290-3247