The POZ 100: S-Z

November 12, 2018

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Thomas Sampson

Age 51

Chicago, IL

Thomas Sampson

Thomas, also known as “Tommy Avant Garde,” has been advocating for HIV prevention for over 30 years—and he does it in style. Diagnosed with HIV in 1992, he currently works for the Southside Health Advocacy Resource Partnership, a community mobilization group that helps to empower the community. Since 2003, he has also been the “headmaster” of the School of Opulence, a creative venture that teaches the art of voguing while addressing HIV awareness. Thomas advocates for prevention in the ballroom scene and oversees a leadership council of young adults in the community. Thomas’s work transcends all populations, nationalities and genders—and generational gaps. For that, he gets 10s across the board!

Charles Sanchez

Age 50

New York City, NY

Charles Sanchez

Charles learned he had AIDS in 2003 after waking up from a medically induced coma, the result of undiagnosed HIV. “I decided to use my big mouth and sense of humor to become an HIV advocate,” he recalls. “Of course, first I had to learn to walk again.” He also had to get sober. Today, he’s singing, dancing and acting his activist heart out as the star of the web series Merce. Now in postproduction for its second season, the musical series follows the unapologetically gay, jazz-handy middle-aged Merce, who has HIV but isn’t sad or sick. Charles also writes about his HIV-related experiences for Positively Aware, TheBody.com, HuffPost Queer Voices, Them.us and others. In his work, he likes to break HIV stereotypes and promote the U=U message. He recently conquered Broadway—in a photo shoot for the October/November cover of POZ. This Charles is definitely in charge!

Steve Schalchlin

Age 65

New York City, NY

Steve SchalclinAnnie Tritt/A&U Magazine

Widely regarded as one of the first HIV/AIDS bloggers, Steve was ahead of the curve in 1996 when he started documenting his journey with HIV by writing about his daily life to keep his family in the loop about his health. He noticed that strangers were taking an interest, and soon he developed an online following. After he started taking a new medication, his health vastly improved, and he began to share stories about his travels, his songwriting and the award-winning musical he wrote, titled The Last Session, with his partner, Jim Brochu. The couple also wrote and performed The Big Voice: God or Merman?, about their marriage. Steve’s blog, Living in the Bonus Round, has been going strong for two decades, and he now uses the platform to share the realities of aging with HIV through his writing and his “wicked” sense of humor.

Scott Schlaffman

Age 60

Minneapolis, MN

Scott Schlaffman

For 26 years, Scott has been “the most dedicated volunteer” at The Aliveness Project, a community center for and driven by people living with HIV in Minnesota. In the late ’90s, Scott was executive director for the center. Today, he’s a member of the board of directors and volunteers as the charitable gaming coordinator. Scott has helped raise over $250,000 in proceeds annually for the organization. These funds are critical to maintaining the overall operations of the center, which provides essential services to those living with HIV, including a food shelf, meal program, medication assistance, housing resources, HIV education and a full-time dietitian who specializes in HIV-related nutrition.

Harold R. “Scottie” Scott

Age 56

Lebanon, TN

Harold Scott

On World AIDS Day in 1994, in an effort to bring awareness to the epidemic and to educate others, Scottie shared his personal story of living with HIV in a rural environment. He’s been an advocate ever since. Scottie has been part of various committees for Ryan White funding, including serving as a cochair. In 2017, he wrote and published If I Were Brave, a book that chronicles his HIV journey. A portion of the book’s sales went to Nashville CARES. For over 20 years, Scottie has

worked as a “one-man movement” to serve as a voice for those who cannot live publicly with their HIV status.

Chanelle Sessooms

Age 62

New York, NY

Chanelle Sessooms

Chanelle does amazing work doing outreach for transgender and gender-non-conforming communities in New York City. She currently works in the sexual reproductive justice/policy department at GMHC, where she educates and encourages folks to attend workshops and speaks

out about how important it is for trans people to feel empowered in their bodies. Chanelle also works with the public policy department on HIV/AIDS education and prevention and advocates for sex workers' rights, access to health care and the HIV-positive community. She is an active member of her church, a frequent visitor/volunteer at Riker's Island—where she offers spiritual guidance to inmates—and an incredibly positive and determined force in her community.

Robert (Bob) Skinner

Age 68

Corvallis, OR

Bob Skinner

Bob has been involved in HIV/AIDS advocacy since 1981—since the first time he heard about the virus on the evening news. After losing many of his close friends to AIDS, he discovered in 2000 that he, too, was HIV positive. Diagnosed with AIDS on his 50th birthday, he was told he had only a few months to live. But he immediately started treatment and gave up drugs and alcohol. He

decided to learn more about HIV and underwent volunteer training at the Valley AIDS Information Network in Oregon. Now, he's the president and CEO of VAIN and the community cochair of the Oregon State Prevention Group. He recently retired from his role as a master trainer for Stanford University's "Living a Healthy Life with HIV" program. Alongside his partner of 17 years, Bob says he is "living and thriving with HIV/AIDS."

Winthrop Smith

Age 63

Augusta, ME

Winthrop Smith

Winthrop is a writer and poet who has spent more than 30 years giving back to the LGBT and HIV communities. After his own diagnosis in the 1980s, Winthrop started working at the National AIDS Hotline, providing support and answering questions about the epidemic. He also ran a drop-in support group for HIV-positive men in New York City and was a home attendant and case worker for terminal AIDS patients through the New York office of Home Care America. He sat on the board of the People with AIDS Coalition/NY and was the cochair of the community advisory board for the AIDS Support Group of Cape Cod. After moving to Maine, Winthrop launched Augusta's EGR Writers House, a creative residency that offers subsidized housing to LGBT writers. His creative practice currently focuses on remembering those in the arts lost to AIDS, most recently, the men featured in the portraits of artist Larry Stanton.

William Snow

Age 71

Forestville, CA

William has advocated for HIV vaccines since 1990. Five years later, he and eight other HIV treatment activists founded AVAC. He was heavily involved in writing the first of several AVAC reports and the first edition of the widely used HIV Vaccines Handbook. Currently a senior adviser at AVAC, William spent nearly five years as director of the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise Secretariat, which represents the alliance of independent organizations globally dedicated to accelerating the development of a preventive HIV vaccine. Among his many accomplishments, he was instrumental in establishing national, local and global community advisory boards at the several National Institutes of Health clinical trial networks. William has also served a term on the Office of AIDS Research Advisory Council and was an original member of the AIDS Vaccine Research Committee. He’s been a part of almost every HIV vaccine group’s advisory committees and boards.

Steve Stagon

Age 67

Fort Lauderdale, FL

Steve Stagon

Steve—along with members of his support group—had a dream to create the very first museum dedicated to the HIV epidemic. In 2014, thanks to 70 donors and a large charitable grant, that dream came true and the doors to the World AIDS Museum and Educational Center opened in South Florida. Under his watch, the museum boasts an array of innovative and powerful exhibits, hosts a series of high-profile events with iconic and emerging HIV activists and does community outreach in local schools focusing on HIV, stigma and more. Before founding the museum, Steve worked for AIDS Health Foundation, providing STI testing in the community.

Tom Straley

Age 56

Minneapolis, MN

Tom Straley

Tom has spent more than 25 years volunteering for his community in Minneapolis. A lot of people know him from the front desk at The Aliveness Project, a community center created by and for people living with HIV (he also sits on the board of directors). Others know him from his glamorous blonde alter ego, Crystal Balls, who donates thousands of dollars earned from her drag performances with the Imperial Court of Minnesota and the North Star Gay Rodeo Association. Tom also raises thousands of dollars a year for The Aliveness Project through Dining Out for Life, an annual fundraising event, and sits on the board of directors for Camp Benedict, a free summer camp for families living with HIV. He is also a peer educator with JustUs Health, where he shares his experience as a long-term survivor.

John Tenorio

Age 53

Canon City, CO

John TenorioJensen Larson

John is currently the executive director of the National Native American AIDS Prevention Center in Colorado. Diagnosed in 2006, he began his HIV advocacy soon after, with the major goals of strengthening the lives of Native Americans living with HIV/AIDS, educating the community about the disease and prevention, and reducing stigma. In addition, the father of two is part of the BLOC Building Leaders of Color and was named a 2018 HIV 50+ Strong and Healthy Scholar at this year's USCA. He's currently being evaluated for a new kidney and hopes to receive a transplant soon. John will never stop fighting for a seat at the table.

Larry Watson

Age 53

Hackensack, NJ

Larry Watson

Diagnosed in 1988, Larry is a harm reduction counselor at the Bronx Shelter ACT Team/Community Access. He is a passionate, team-oriented pro who guides people into treatment, housing and medical care. He works with a variety of populations, including people with substance use disorders, people living with HIV/AIDS, the LGBTQ community and people who are homeless, living with mental illness or reentering the community after incarceration. Following a recent stroke, Larry was back to work in less than two weeks. He regularly walks up to people on the street with offers of help and visits people in the hospital who aren't even in his caseload. While in federal prison, Larry started the NEED-2-KNOW program, through which he gave every fellow inmate who took an HIV test $5 from his own commissary account.

Hector Xtravaganza

Age 60

Bronx, NY

Hector Xtravaganza

As the cofounder and grandfather of the House of Xtravaganza, Hector has spent much of his life educating LGBT people of color about HIV and AIDS through the house and ball scene in New York City. He has mentored and counseled generations of queer young people in the art of voguing and how to negotiate safer sex. Hector has participated in GMHC's House of Latex Ball since its inception in 1990; the event raises HIV awareness and is the largest of its kind. He also regularly volunteers for GMHC and other community-based organizations. Most recently, Hector lent his expertise to Ryan Murphy as a consultant on his hit TV series Pose, which is set in the 1980s and features several prominent HIV storylines. This legend's influence and positive messaging are thankfully now reaching the masses.

Michael "Zee" Zalnasky

Age 58

Wilton Manors, FL

Michael Zalnasky

Even if you've never met him or chatted with him via @ZeeStrong, chances are, you've seen Michael's work. After battling a mysterious illness and weight loss, Zee learned he had AIDS in 2014. He immediately told his daughter and then, via email, his 4,000 coworkers. Since then, he's been helping others announce their status and fight stigma on social media and advocates for other heterosexuals with HIV. Zee created the Facebook group AIDS HIV Survivor Living Memorial, a collection of thousands of photos of people in the HIV community. He creates digital frames around the pictures along with words describing the person's positive traits. Portraits are organized into over 60 albums, with campaign titles such as "I am a Face of AIDS and I Will Not Hide," "I Want a Cure" and "HIV+ Women, Strong Active Healthy." People across the globe seek out Zee's frames. Check them out by searching #TheDigitalLivingQuilt and #AIDSHIVSurvivorLivingMemorial.

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