Musical Missionary

August 6, 2013 By Shanita Ealey

At 61, the Reverend Charles Grindle is busier than ever. He works as the director of music and choir for two Unitarian Universalist churches in southern Maine. He's also a poet, runner, fundraiser, cancer survivor, educational speaker—and a gay man living with HIV. Grindle was 37 when he was diagnosed with the virus in 1988.

Since then, Grindle has made it his life mission to be "totally poz out." That self-coined phrase means "being able to admit to yourself and others that, yes, you are HIV positive," Grindle says. It also entails "being a voice and presence for those who cannot be [out] because of fear of familial rejection, employment discrimination or loss of a loved one."

Being "totally poz out" is a role Grindle accepts entirely. "I just want to help lead others in a safe direction," he says. As such, Grindle has written the newsletter for his local AIDS service organization, the Frannie Peabody Center, for three years, and he has given educational speeches to colleges, high schools and hospitals. He recently ran in the Southern Maine 5K Run/Walk for AIDS 2013, an event that raised more than $45,000. He has also appeared on television for World AIDS Day to discuss living with HIV. In addition, his poems have been published in an anthology titled Stories From the Other Side.

Grindle focuses most of his work on raising HIV/AIDS awareness and breaking down negative stereotypes. He urges others not to be afraid to disclose their status. "Making those personal connections," he says, "is going to help get rid of the stigma." We caught up with the reverend to ask a few more questions.

What three adjectives best describe you?
Open, friendly and caring.

What keeps you up at night?
Thinking about ways to do more and how I can give more back to the community.

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?
Mark S. King [the blogger and author of a recent POZ cover essay on HIV stigma]. He has always been more out than I will probably ever get.

If you could be any animal, what would you choose to be? And why?
I would be a dog. Perhaps a service dog, because they are always ready to give unconditional love and they are always ready to interact. They also just enjoy each moment as it comes. That is something we forget to do as humans.

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