Editor’s Letter

Secrets of Success

November 12, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

When fashion designer (and this month’s cover subject) Mondo Guerra disclosed his HIV status this fall on *Project Runway*, like many other viewers, I got a little teary-eyed. But when he told judge Nina Garcia, “I feel a lot better. I feel free,” I lost it. I knew exactly what he meant: The stigma around HIV puts so many of us into a cage of solitude and silence. And if we find the courage or impetus to escape, the relief is often enormous.

When I interviewed him a few weeks after the episode aired (read the interview on my blog at POZ.com), Guerra told me his CD4 count had shot up. He said he felt healthier than ever—and the numbers showed it. A mere month after I started at POZ and told my story on the cover, the same thing happened to me: For the first time in a decade, though I changed nothing else in my life, my CD4 count shot up by 200. And stayed there.

It only makes sense. Secrets can eat us alive when kept to ourselves. POZ founder Sean Strub recently reminded me of a quote by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis: “Sunlight is the best disinfectant.” There is nothing as damaging to a poisonous secret as its release. When we tell our truth, we own it—it doesn’t own us in the way it can when we keep it hidden.

I told my sister and parents I was HIV positive three months after my diagnosis. Their unwavering, nonjudgmental understanding and support have bolstered me every bit as much as medical care. But it wasn’t until I told my story to others that I was truly free.

Guerra told me his parents were relieved, in a way, to finally understand what he was facing. His mom said she knew something was wrong. Guerra had been in and out of the hospital; once he had been so sick he’d developed Kaposi’s sarcoma, a rare sight today. That Guerra’s health had declined to such extremes probably had a lot to do with the fact that he kept his status a secret for so long.

I’m glad he was finally able to share his story. He is a fantastic young man, a really talented designer and now, a role model for people living with HIV.

Which is why we put him on our cover for the POZ 100. Some might ask, “Why is merely saying you have HIV—even on national TV—enough to get you on the list?” To which I answer: Because it

is incredibly hard to disclose your HIV status. And it is exponentially harder when millions of people are watching you. By sharing his story not only did Guerra demonstrate remarkable courage, but he also leveraged his position in the limelight to illuminate the fact that HIV is still very much an issue today.

On the occasion of World AIDS Day, December 1, 2010, we tip our hats to Guerra and 99 others who are among the best AIDS fighters we know. They have shown us, and will likely continue to show us, the way forward to a world where HIV is seen exactly as it should be: just another disease. And maybe a thing of the past.

Surviving HIV day in and out is reason enough to make you a hero in our eyes. So, as we celebrate the POZ 100 we also raise a toast to all of you. May you have safe, healthy and joyful holidays.

And may 2011, the 30th anniversary of the discovery of the virus, bring us a year closer to the end of HIV/AIDS.

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