Native Son

March 28, 2011 By Willette Francis

In 1997, while a graduate student in Los Angeles, Elton Naswood learned his older brother, Eldon "Ebba" Naswood, was HIV positive. They had much in common, both being Navajo and gay. At the time, though, the younger Naswood knew very little about HIV. That soon changed. On May 24, 1998, Ebba died of AIDS-related illness, and his passing left an unexpected impression on his brother. Naswood was disturbed to learn how the Indian Health Services and the community on the Navajo reservation in Fort Defiance, Arizona, treated his brother—he endured stigma for being a gay Navajo who was also HIV positive and had hepatitis C.

These experiences lead Naswood, who is negative, to become an ally for the HIV-positive community. He is the program coordinator for The Red Circle Project, a program he established in 2003 that's specifically geared toward HIV prevention and education among LA's Native American gay, or two-spirit, men (the program is part of AIDS Project Los Angeles). Naswood shares some life lessons with *POZ*.

What three adjectives best describe you?
Passionate, visionary, optimistic.

What is your greatest achievement?
Four years of sobriety—and taking it one day at a time.

What is your greatest regret?
Not being present and able to comfort my older brother before he passed away. It has taken me many years to forgive myself, but I know he is my guardian angel.

What keeps you up at night?
The traffic and police sirens from the freeway as I live next to the I-10 freeway in Los Angeles! And to know that there are people who are hungry and homeless in the City of Angels.

If you could change one thing about people living with HIV, what would it be?
[That they could have] equal and affordable access to treatment, care and drugs.

What is the best advice you ever received?
"Be who you are and do not be ashamed," given to me by my mother knowing that I was

“nadleeh,” a gay Navajo.

What person, or people, in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?
I admire my dear friend Lisa Tiger, who is a Native Muscogee Creek woman living strong and healthy with HIV/AIDS for over 20 years. I met Lisa while still in high school on the Navajo reservation when she spoke to our youth, not knowing that she would become a great friend, educator and ally in this fight against HIV/AIDS within the Native communities.

What is your motto?
“Everything happens for a reason.”

Go to redcircleproject.org for more information.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Elton-Naswood-HIV-20111-5606