Frequent Flyer

New Zealander Chris Arneson keeps coming back for more

April 1, 1999 By Becky Minnich

For the past five years, the U.S. government has put Chris Arneson, a 56-year-old New Zealander with HIV, through the red-tape wringer. Since he was profiled in POZ *("Chris Crossed," April 1998), readers have had a ringside seat as the Kiwi wrangled to collect the Social Security benefits he earned—but was denied—after 30 years of working in the United States.*

In July, after lassoing a herd of lawyers and working the media, Arneson was allowed to visit San Francisco, thus moving one mountain: the 1993 HIV Exclusion Act, which blocks HIV positive foreigners from entering the country (see "Enter at Your Own Risk," POZ *November 1998).*

From his seaside New Zealand home, the self-proclaimed "coffin dodger" told POZ *that although he has won some battles, he's still waging war—when he isn't catching waves on his longboard—on behalf of everyone who hasn't.*

You've been pushing the legal envelope this year.
Yes, my case has really collected momentum. Some wonderful lawyers in San Francisco are filing suit against U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno. We're challenging the HIV Exclusion Act based on violations of the Fifth and 14th amendments. I think we have a chance of overturning this unjust law. But it'll take time—at least a year and a half, with me flying back and forth.

Is that hard on your health?
The flights are long, but not unbearable. As long as I sleep a lot before and after, I'm fine. So far, my health has kept up extremely well. It helps, of course, to have a lovely beach home to come back to. I work in the garden and surf almost every day. It's a relaxing life.

No ailments at all?
Well, I have chronic problems with skin cancer, but I'm so used to dealing with it that it doesn't bother me anymore. Last year I had surgery for basal cell carcinoma and had to have some scalp tissue and part of one ear removed. They reconstructed it with plastic surgery. I'm going back next month for more work on that— apparently they didn't get it all. You have to be very careful with skin cancer, especially when your immune system is compromised. I make sure to wear a T-shirt while surfing.

How are you doing on your antiretrovirals?
Right now I'm taking ddI [Videx], 3TC [Epivir], and nelfinavir [Viracept]. It appears to be working—my viral load is undetectable and my CD4 count has been 170 to 200, which is a big improvement considering it was 70 when I tested positive.

Are you combing the beaches and crossing the Pacific with anyone?
You mean a relationship? Oh, no. I had my heart broken years ago, and vowed never again. I have no desire for a relationship. I remember the gay couples I knew in San Francisco who settled down together and never did anything. I'd be saying, "Let's go to a show!" and waiting in line for three hours for cheap theater tickets—me with AIDS and everything—but they couldn't be bothered. They stayed home every night, renting videos and complaining that all their friends had died. I thank God I didn't end up that way. No, I have friends and family all around—I'm happily celibate and have a very full life.

You seem quite energetic.
Oh, I'm a box of birds.

A box of what?
Birds. It's a New Zealand expression. It means lively and chipper. Just imagine what a box of birds would sound like, all chirping away.

So, what's next in your future?
Oh, I hate that question. As far as my Social Security case, I think if I persevere I could succeed in really changing something, and not just for people with HIV. Did you know that there are currently 18,600 non-U.S. citizens who've worked in your country and paid $4 billion into Social Security, but legally can't collect it? It's not right, but hopefully my case will set a precedent. So tell everyone back in the States that I'm a box of birds, still going strong and planning to enjoy many more years to come.

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