Full Disclosure

Demitri Moshoyannis on leather, love and the talking cure

March 1, 1999 By Becky Minnich

Even after AIDS educator Demetri Moshoyannis tested positive in 1994—despite years of leading HIV-prevention workshops—his talent for disclosure did not go unrecognized. A 1996 POZ *profile catalogued a stunning list of Moshoyannis' accomplishments as an HIV positive youth educator: He bent the ear of the president at a White House AIDS conference, advised then–AIDS czar Patsy Fleming with a major report on HIV and adolescence, and used a $36,000 grant as seed money for Youth Positive, a DC-based ASO for young HIVers.*

When POZ *caught up with the 27-year-old organizer in San Francisco, where he works for the Names Project raising money for the AIDS quilt, he talked about his work only briefly. Having recently discovered psychotherapy, leather and love, Moshoyannis has other things on his mind.*

How do you like San Francisco?
It's wonderful. I live in the Castro with a gay couple who has been together for years. San Francisco is one of the few places where you can be yourself and just get on with your life and not have your sexuality be an issue. Here, if you cruise a straight guy, he'll just giggle or be flattered—he won't beat you up.

What made you move to Babylon by the Bay?
I came here because I thought I could be open with my status. And I am—but I'm still flabbergasted by the number of young men who don't disclose openly and freely.

What community activities are you involved in?
I'm on the board of directors of Bay Positives, a peer support project for young people with HIV. I'm also in a leather [S/M] fraternity called Men of Discipline. I've found that S/M—which usually doesn't involve the exchange of fluids—allows me to explore sex in ways that let me forget about HIV. S/M forces you to discuss your boundaries, both physical and emotional. A lot of gay men still don't have refined communication skills around sexual behavior—they just kind of let things happen.

Do you ever get burned out on AIDS work?
I often get frustrated with all the politics and backstabbing and territoriality within the AIDS community, and with having to re-educate funders so they don't de-prioritize AIDS. And sometimes

I come into work and say, “Jesus, I’m working in the middle of a graveyard!” But I’ve gotten used to all that, and something about the Names Project just feels right to me.

Have you applied what you’ve learned from S/M to your AIDS work?
Not really. My attitude is a little more flexible than it used to be, but being in the leather community is personal. I need to internalize stuff before I take it to a professional level.

What’s new in your personal life?
I started going to a therapist a couple of months ago. I wanted to understand myself and why I do what I do. I’ve always had this driving need for a significant relationship—I just crave love and I’m very uncomfortable being alone. When I seroconverted in 1994, the popular conception was that I’d have 10 years to live. It’s been five, which means I have five left to make something happen with somebody or I’m gonna die alone—a scary prospect. But I have friends who just hit the 10-year mark and they’re asking new questions like, “Do I need to plan for retirement?” So who knows? But I think everyone should be in therapy.

Did you get much love growing up?
Oh, no. And that has so much to do with everything, including why I seroconverted. Even though I knew the risks—I mean I was doing HIV prevention at the time—I would still let somebody enter me because I didn’t know how to say, “Stop, I want you to put on a condom.” I was dominated by this need to please people.

Are you in a relationship now?
Yes, and it’s going very well. I’ve passed the four-month barrier—a major breakthrough for me. We’re very happy and talking about the future.

What’s your strategy for dealing with HIV?
Good nutrition, lots of sleep, going to the gym. I’ve been on combination therapy for a year and a half now. No protease inhibitors, but I’ve been on d4T [Zerit], 3TC [Epivir], nevirapine [Viramune] and acyclovir [Zovirax]. My viral load has been undetectable for a year and a half, and my T-cells have been in the mid-600s to 700s. I’m doing well. I would have to say this is the best time in my life so far.

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