



HIV Resists!

Meet six activists living with the virus and fighting for your rights.

June 26, 2017 By [Trent Straube](#) and [Alicia Green](#)

In today's political climate, more and more of us are feeling under siege. How could we not, amid the barrage of tweets from President Trump and promises from congressional leaders to deport immigrants, incarcerate Black people, defund Planned Parenthood, ban Muslim travelers, criminalize HIV and take away health care—with new threats and fresh turmoil seeming to crop up each day. But a growing number of us are fed up and fighting back. Who better to lead the charge than HIV activists? Here, POZ profiles six leaders who will inspire you to get involved and stay woke.

Marco Castro-Bojorquez | Jose Alfaro

Marco Castro-Bojorquez

HIS STORY: Soon after Marco Castro-Bojorquez immigrated to San Francisco from Mexico, he became involved with activism, volunteering at the Shanti Project (which helps people with life-threatening illnesses) and promoting HIV prevention. He also volunteered at the Frameline San Francisco International LGBTQ Film Festival. An HIV diagnosis in 1999 didn't slow him down—it gave him a new focus; he even began making his own films. He now lives in Los Angeles, where he did a brief stint with the HIV and LGBT advocacy group Lambda Legal. Castro-Bojorquez volunteers with the United States People Living with HIV Caucus and works to decriminalize HIV. He is also a convener with Venas Abiertas, a network of Latinx immigrants living with the virus. What moves him to do all this? “The deplorable racial disparities in the epidemic.” Plus, he wants to help communities targeted by the Trump administration’s “cruel and despicable actions.”

CHALLENGES AND ASSETS: On one hand, activism can be an emotional experience. “People may assume that because we fight for a cause, we don't feel pain or anger, but it's a sense of

consciousness that helps us do our work,” Castro-Bojorquez says. “There have been instances when I got home and just cried like a baby.” On the other hand, “I value the activist community so much. The solidarity, generosity and skill sharing are remarkable and keep me hopeful.”

FAVORITE MEMORY: After he invited a Mexican delegation to the HIV Is Not a Crime II National Training Academy, Castro-Bojorquez and a group of activists traveled to Mexico last September “to show solidarity with the folks of Veracruz and their fight against HIV criminalization.” During the trip, he delivered a letter to the Mexican Supreme Court.

PASSION: Documentary films “have become the most powerful vehicle for my voice as an activist and for the voices of those who have remained silent. For example, my film *El Canto del Colibri* is about Latino immigrant fathers and their queer children. Most men of color in this country are placed in environments where they are not meant to thrive. *El Canto* is an immigration film. But one day I will make a film about immigration and HIV/AIDS.” —AG

HER STORY: Cecilia Chung, a transgender woman, remembers her activist spirit emerging in her all-boys high school in Hong Kong, where the more effeminate students organized to confront bullying. After arriving in San Francisco, she marched in solidarity with the Chinese Tiananmen Square protesters and volunteered with the Asian AIDS Project on outreach for the transgender community (she was portrayed this year in the TV series *When We Rise*). In 1993, Chung learned she was HIV positive. For almost 25 years, she has advocated for HIV, LGBT equality and social justice through numerous endeavors in San Francisco, such as the Transgender Discrimination Taskforce and the Human Rights Commission. Today, she's the senior strategist at the Transgender Law Center in the Bay Area, where she developed the Positively Trans (T+) project to combat the stigma, discrimination and inequality faced by transgender people living with HIV.

CHALLENGES: Make time for yourself as an activist, she advises. "To really do this kind of work, and do it well, we have to be mindful of our stress and the vicarious trauma that we experience when talking to other members in the community," Chung says. To address that, she explains, "we have to establish some proper support in our own lives."

WHAT YOU CAN DO: Not all activists are in front of the crowd, pounding their fists. "That's one form of direct action, but that's not the only way we can advocate," she says. "We can also reach out to policymakers and different policy bodies to continue these conversations with key stakeholders and decision makers. The most important part is being active," Chung says. How can you do that? "Find something that you are either passionate about or you want to learn more about, spend some time volunteering for organizations that understand those issues and really participate in any organized actions or activities." —AG

Jeremiah Johnson Dan Chavkin

Jeremiah Johnson

HIS STORY: “I was always politically minded and passionate about LGBT rights,” Jeremiah Johnson says, but in 2008, while serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine, he tested HIV positive—and was forced to leave the assignment. Working with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), he got the Peace Corps’ discriminatory policy overturned. Today, he’s the community engagement coordinator at Treatment Action Group, where he focuses on issues of HIV treatment and prevention. “In 2017, with clean syringes, PrEP, PEP and TASP,” he says, referring to pre- and post-exposure prophylaxis and treatment as prevention, “we have the tools to end epidemics, yet people can’t access them due to social and political nonsense—and that continues to light a fire within me.” He also devotes energy to broader politics. “The current presidential administration has emerged as the primary threat to the health and well-being of so many Americans,” he says. That’s why he cofounded Rise and Resist, an ACT UP-style anti-Trump group in New York City.

ASSETS: Activists persist in the face of adversity, he says, “but much has to be learned over time through experience. HIV/AIDS activists have a skill set that many newer activists are just now getting acquainted with—such as training in civil disobedience and fighting oppressive systems. Similarly, we need to turn toward transgender activists and activists from communities of color,

who are truly knowledgeable of how to lead activism under oppressive governments.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO: “Patience is key, so try out different groups—look at IndivisibleGuide.com and MeetUp.com—and don’t stop until you find answers and connections you need.” What if your ideal group isn’t nearby? “Reach out to existing groups,” Johnson suggests, “and see how you can start your own meeting.” —TS

Naina Khanna Hector Emanuel

Naina Khanna

HER STORY: Diagnosed with HIV in 2002 while traveling in India, Naina Khanna returned to the United States to lead youth voter engagement in the 2004 election. About two years later, after taking time to deal with her diagnosis, she turned to HIV activism, specifically contending with the lack of leadership by women of color living with the virus. Today, from “Warrior Town” (Oakland, California), she heads the Positive Women’s Network-USA (PWN-USA), which addresses that very issue, along with topics that intersect with racial, gender and reproductive justice. Sign up for the group’s action alerts and you’ll get schooled on lobby days, legislation, immigration rights, HIV

criminalization and health care issues, plus you'll hear about like-minded activists, such as the Trump-resistance group Indivisible.

WHAT YOU CAN DO: There's more to activism than protests. "Can you make a few phone calls? Organize a letter-writing campaign? Give public testimony at a city council meeting? That's activism," says Khanna, who considers herself more of an organizer than an activist. "Can you cook or take care of kids or make signs? Whatever you can do, there's a place for you in the movement." And don't think your contribution won't make a difference, she says, noting that policymakers can be swayed by a constituent's phone call or personal story. "Whatever you do," she stresses, "you do make a difference."

ADVICE: With so much prejudice and hate emanating from the Trump administration, "people are dealing with very real trauma and don't feel safe," Khanna says, "and that can burn you out faster. I encourage folks to take good care of themselves, and don't feel like you have to go to every single meeting. Remember, we are in this for the long haul." Similarly, she notes, "sometimes we have to step back and let others step forward, which requires sharing leadership, information and power." Also: "Activists are passionate, so you're going to be around strong personalities and strong ideas. Don't take things personally. Learn to listen and to develop self-awareness so you're not constantly triggered. Learn what works for you so you can show up as authentically and effectively as possible." And sign up for those PWN-USA action alerts! —TS

Ashton Woods

HIS STORY: Intersectionality is at the root of activism for Ashton Woods. “All the work I do is in areas that generally affect me being a Black man who happens to be gay, atheist and HIV positive.” At his New Orleans high school, he started a gay-straight alliance. Today, he organizes with Black Lives Matter in his current home, Houston, and he’s working to increase HIV education and visibility in the Black community—and to increase Black visibility within the LGBT movement. He was diagnosed with HIV in 2008, but “the HIV piece didn’t really come around in my activism until about 2014 because of the stigma I was hearing and seeing.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO: “Find out what you are pissed off about,” Woods says, “because that will usually determine where you’ll start, what problem you’ll want to fix. Then you can build your platform, whether behind the scenes or in public.” Case in point: After protesting the death of Sandra Bland (who was found dead under suspicious circumstances in a Texas jail after a traffic arrest in 2015), Woods testified on state House panels, which helped lawmakers write a bill to prevent such injustices. He has also learned the policy side of the political world and served as a consultant to political candidates, including the mayor of Houston. Today, Woods himself is eyeing

a run for public office.

ADVICE: “An uninformed activist is an ineffective activist, so do your research,” says Woods, who considers it part of his job to teach people how to channel their anger. “If you want to dismantle institutional racism, don’t just yell ‘Fuck the police.’ Go to city council and testify; learn that systems of oppression have sources of power.” And when you face burnout, Woods recommends, “get yourself together, watch television or Netflix—but not the news—hang out with friends and have lots of sex. That’s important as hell!” —TS

Tim MurphyBill Wadman

Tim Murphy

HIS STORY: Known for reporting HIV stories—he’s been writing for POZ for more than 15 years—Tim Murphy is now making headlines with his art and activism. He tested HIV positive in 2001, while struggling with depression and meth addiction. It took him a few years to accept his diagnosis and “get past the shame of it being associated with addiction and unsafe sex.” Working at POZ, Murphy says, helped lead him to activism, as he learned how past generations fought so he could access treatment. This insight informed his 2016 novel, *Christodora*, which includes elements of AIDS history and HIV activism as well as addiction and long-term survivors. After last

summer's shooting at the LGBT nightclub Pulse in Orlando, Florida, which killed 49 people, Murphy rallied for gun-safety laws as part of Gays Against Guns. And today, he fights against President Trump and a right-wing Congress via the health care division of New York City-based organization Rise and Resist. Having chronic health issues, he says, "made me realize how important it is for everyone to have coverage."

CHALLENGES AND ASSETS: "Many of the HIV activists are long-term survivors, or poor, or facing other stressors like racism, homophobia and transphobia," Murphy notes. "The less power and fewer personal resources a group has, the harder it can be to do activism. It's also challenging right now because in the Trump era so many rights and needs are under attack." But the HIV activist community is resilient, he says, adding that the best activists in Rise and Resist are often those from the early days of AIDS actions. "Those gray-haired folks still have a lot of fight left in them!"

FAVORITE MEMORY: Murphy recalls when Rise and Resist members visited two restaurants in Trump International Hotel & Tower for brunch in January. "At a certain point, we all started coughing loudly," Murphy recalls. "Then we stood up, held signs and chanted, 'We need Obamacare. Trumpcare makes us sick,' as security slowly ushered us out into the street, where hundreds of people were rallying." For Murphy, it felt great to "disrupt that little enclave of wealth and profit for Trump" to make a statement. When Murphy's protesting the president, he notes, Trump supporters often yell, "Get a job!" His response? "I yell back, 'I have a job, but this is important to me. What's important to you?'" —AG