Heartland Hero

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Josh Conrade grew up believing in helping those in need, so it was no surprise that he joined the fight against HIV/AIDS. “I was always brought up with the thought that everyone looked out for and took care of everyone. If one person was in trouble, everyone helped out,” says Conrade, who is now the development assistant at Minnesota AIDS Project.

In 1996, his natural instinct to invest himself in others led him to a position as bar back at the Saloon, an LGBT bar and grill in Minneapolis. During his time there, Conrade became a bartender and eventually a community events coordinator, helping groups such as Minnesota AIDS Project with the logistics of HIV-related fund-raisers. He also helped plan memorials for bar patrons who died of AIDS-related illnesses.

These events were stepping-stones to his current job, but the motivation for his line of work was more personal. “The beginning of my HIV/AIDS work was the one-on-one relations I had with regular clientele that trusted and knew me enough to talk to me about what they were going through,” Conrade says.

As a gay man, Conrade related to the stigma and discrimination experienced by his many HIV-positive patrons. “[I wanted to] make the ones that have HIV feel at ease and to not come down on themselves,” he recalls, “but yet to help the ones that don’t have it to think more about their actions.”

In 2006, he was no longer working for the Saloon, but his passion for helping people living with HIV/AIDS never waned. In fact, it grew more personal. That same year he was also diagnosed HIV positive. Conrade forged ahead with his volunteerism.

He began helping out at Camp Heartland (now known as One Heartland), which operates camps and other programs for children, youth and their families living with and affected by HIV. The stories of these children’s struggles with stigma and discrimination bolstered his desire to help those living with the virus.

In 2009, Conrade was honored with the HandsOn Twin Cities’ volunteer award in health. “What made me happiest about [receiving the award] was a chance to speak to even more people about HIV,” he says.

Recently, Conrade was chosen to be one of 10 individuals in the Positive Leaders program at the Minnesota AIDS Project, a program geared toward giving a face and voice to HIV. As a positive leader, Conrade is using his name, his status and his face to speak up for the community—and to hopefully empower them to find their own voices. True to his upbringing, even when he's in the spotlight, Conrade is thinking of others. "When I go and talk to our representatives or senators and other public officials," he says, "it is not just my voice speaking, but many."

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