It’s My Party

Gay glamourboy Thom Collins goes straight and narrow

May 1, 1997 By Manjula Martin

Thom Collins burst out of his serocloset when he appeared on the cover of POZ *in February/March 1995. This gay-party poster-boy currently juggles speaking engagements, family (partner David and David’s children) and his two-year-old Oklahoma-based Open Your Heart Foundation seemingly without pause. (Yes, it is named after the Madonna song.) Exploding with news and always willing to talk about himself, Collins wants to share his treatment experiences with anyone who wants--or needs--to know.*

It’s been two years since *POZ* put me out and on the scene. I was the first body boy on the gay-party circuit to really come out and say something about the disease, and I wasn’t ashamed of anything I did. People started following my trail, and I kind of got a good feeling inside knowing I had something to do with taking away some of the shame. When you’re thrust into that kind fo spotlight, people look at you different, and they expect you to be this perfect package and it’s not true. My whole concept is to let people know: This is who I am. I’m HIV positive. I’m not embarassed to be this way. I’ve been called a pioneer, the Jesus of the gay community, the devil. I know who I am, and I’m living my life the best way I know how.

For two years after the *POZ* article, I was catapulted into doing so many things. I was taking AZT and 3TC and traveling to different cities doing support groups and performing, talk shows, circuit events, you name it. The stress was starting to catch up with me. By last July, my T-cells had gone to an all-time low of 220, but with absolutely no opportunistic infections in sight. I said, “Something’s not right.” My body didn’t feel bad, but my immune system wasn’t working correctly.

So I canceled all my events for August. I said, “I wanna take some time out for Thom.” I wound up going through a whirlwind of depression, completely spiralling down as I sat there watching my count drop, even though I didn’t feel sick.

I panicked. I told my doctor, “I need to do something. Give me the three-drug cocktail.” I started on saquinavir, adding it to the AZT and 3TC. In exactly one month, my T-cells went up to 670 and my viral load went down from 3,000 to 1,000. But the depression was getting to me. By the end of October, I was completely disassociated from people. I didn’t want to go out, I was lethargic, I had headaches, joint pain, no energy, I quit working out--I was miserable. I went to the doctor in November and told him all my symptoms, and he told me it was all in my head. I said, “What’s the

point of living if you feel dead?" I'd been taking medication since 1989, and I just thought, "I'm so toxic." So I quit everything in December. I'm on the "nada treatment," as I call it--taking not a damn thing.

People say, "Oh, you can't stop the protease inhibitors, oh you can't do this, oh you can't do that." Well, that's bullshit. The protease inhibitors are increasing the immune system, but I have not seen one documented thing about how this can affect a person psychologically. I called APLA, I called GMHC, I talked to some of my long-term survivor friends, and they were all experiencing the same psychological side effects. I wanted to use myself as a guinea pig. And something I want to emphasize about doing it this way is that I have the funds and the means to get my viral load and my CD4 count checked every month. Some people aren't capable of doing that. My last CD4 count did go down to about 540 and my viral load went up to 1,200, but I'm not concerned at this point. I feel incredible--I quit taking recreational drugs, I quit drinking, I quit smoking. I'm totally clean of everything at this point in my life. Tomorrow I might so something again, but today I have never felt so 100 percent. Thom is back!

As POZ *went to press, Collins' viral load jumped from 1,200 to 15,000. He decided to start taking AZT and 3TC again and "feels better and more energetic," he said.*

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