London Bridges

BBC star Nigel Wrench spans the radio waves

August 1, 1996 By Justine Buchanan

Seated amid the biggest names in UK radio at the annual Sony awards ceremony -- the industry's equivalent of the Oscars -- Nigel Wrench nervously awaited the announcement for Best Feature Program of 1994.

The 34-year-old host of the BBC's leading drive-time radio news show was, on this occasion, hoping to be rewarded for his other, more unique role -- that of host on *Out This Week*, the only national weekly gay show.

As the Best Feature category drew near, Wrench suddenly decided to reword his acceptance speech. He leaned across the table to *Out This Week*'s producer. "What if I tell them that I'm HIV positive?" His colleague's eyes widened. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

The moment arrived. The envelope was opened. *Out This Week* had won. Minutes later, Wrench held the statue aloft and came out as HIV positive.

One year later, Wrench recalls the occasion over sausage, bacon and eggs in a café close to the BBC.

"It's not very often that you find yourself in that little position of power that getting an award gives to you," he says. "You weren't apologizing for having HIV. You were saying, 'I've just won an award that I'm sure a lot of you would have liked to have won. And, by the way, I'm HIV positive.'"

"It was absolutely the right thing to do," he adds. "I'd thought there'd be a slight intake of breath. What I hadn't expected was this enormous outpouring of warmth. Afterward, very senior people came up to me and said what a courageous thing it was to do. Everybody at work has been very supportive."

Working for a public organization like the BBC gave Nigel the confidence to go public about being positive. Had he been working for a commercial broadcaster, his continued career as a news show host might not have been so assured.

But Wrench is used to taking risks. Raised in South Africa, he cut his teeth as a journalist during the politically turbulent 1980s, reporting on the violence for CNN and NPR. But, at 29, he decided

to return home to a more stable existence in England.

It was also a chance to be openly gay. Since then, he's attempted, as he puts it, "to have relationships." Although he remains the consummate clubber -- "currently, I'm favoring Britpop" -- he's also no stranger to leather bars: "Everyone should have a bit of sleaze in their lives." Then it's home to the suburbs, Maria Callas blasting from a CD player worth far more than his dilapidated classic French car.

Work beckons. Wrench rises to go but discovers his trousers are torn. "I knew there was a reason why I wasn't wearing these," he says. "They're very expensive, darling -- Paul Smith."

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