ONLINE SPECIAL: Top Models

These brave volunteers bared all for our July cover story (you have to get the magazine to see the pics!), lowering their belts and their guard to accompany the issue's special report on criminalizing sex between HIV positive people. Here they reveal even more: the naked truth about living with the virus.

July 1, 2006

TODD MURRAY, 25
New York City
Diagnosed 2001

Why did you start Hope's Voice?
A few years ago, I went to a youth HIV/AIDS conference in Oregon. It was remarkable to be with other young positive people because I had felt isolated for so long. I was asked to give a speech, and I talked about how crazy it was that we'd all come together for one weekend to feel validated and then we all had to go home and feel isolated. If we wanted drastic change, we had to carry the feelings from this one weekend to our lives year round.

How did you feel about posing nearly nude on our cover?
I wanted to show people that I'm here, and I'm gonna fight. Feeling confident, feeling sexy and feeling sexual are all parts of living. I refuse to stop feeling those emotions just because I have HIV. My posing is not about glamorizing HIV; it's about showing confidence. I don't just mean confidence in your looks but the confidence to believe in yourself and live each day to the fullest. And the confidence to not let HIV be the driving factor in your life.

How has HIV changed your sex life?
I have a different perspective because I was diagnosed before I had a lot of sex. But I learned to be more aware and more honest about how I feel. I feel that honesty attracts honesty.

What gets you in the mood?
Plain and simple romance. It is not about flowers or Paris, but the little things. And that's all I can say in a national magazine.

JOSH LUNIOR, 25
New York City
Diagnosed 1986

You contracted HIV from a blood transfusion when you were only 1 ½. What were your first memories of being different from everybody else?
A childhood friend's parents had a very negative reaction: Our playing was always monitored. I didn't realize the ramifications until I got older. I'm very lucky that my mother protected me from the labels being placed on positive people and that my family went beyond what the doctors expected of me.

When did you disclose?
In seventh grade.

So young!
I disclosed to my whole school. It was AIDS Awareness Day. At first, kids saw that I had confidence, and they wanted me to be on their team and play sports with them. They eventually realized the limitations of my hemophilia, but at first, it was a quick high—everyone wanted to get to know me. They recognized my involvement in the community, being able to be an advocate and a spokesperson.

How has HIV impacted your love life?
HIV is a part of my consciousness every day. It sits on my back burner, reminding me that I can't fall in love as easily with someone as maybe an average guy walking around. I see girls' overt interest, but the next time we meet, they quickly stop their flirting. I've had really close female confidantes in my life, but I have to find a way not to fall for someone before really divulging this huge aspect of my life.

You came to our July cover shoot just to support other positive people. How did you end up in the pics?
Christina [see below] and I were laughing and bantering and getting to know each other as friends, and one of the photographers came and said, "You two have some dynamic going there. I want you two to do a photo shoot." And I looked at her and said, "You feel comfortable?" One thing led to another.

CHRISTINA ROCK, 22
Los Angeles
Diagnosed 1986

How did HIV impact your childhood?
I lived with my mother, who was positive too and who passed away when I was 3 ½. I remember playing in the sandbox afterward, and some kids told me that I had AIDS and that they couldn't play with me anymore.

I next lived with my father (who is negative and was afraid to mention I had HIV), and his girlfriend. I still felt different from the other kids. I had to be very aware of being home at a certain time to take my meds. I always felt like there was a big wall between me and the rest of the kids.

What do you think about disclosing in sexual relationships?
It's very important. This one kid got really upset with me because I disclosed after we kissed. Now I try my hardest to disclose before it gets to that point. Now that I'm a public speaker about AIDS, it is easier to talk about. Even though I know what precautions to take, I still would never let it progress to sex without talking about it first. They might get attached and not completely understand the situation.

Do you feel like society believes that because you have HIV, you shouldn't be sexy?
Yeah, it does. Society makes you feel like you need to be ashamed of yourself or that you can't have sex. Like you're false advertising.

What do you hope readers take away from your provocative pictures?
I hope that people will be more comfortable talking about HIV. Also, I want for readers see that it is possible to have HIV and still be sexy. This is not the end of the world. It may change things a little bit, but it doesn't change the person that you are.

NINA MARTINEZ, 22
Atlanta
Diagnosed 1991

You contracted HIV though a blood transfusion after you were born, but your twin sister did not. How has that affected your relationship?
I go through things that she could not imagine. We are supposed to be the same, but something like this makes us fundamentally different.

And your family in general?
This is my coming-out year [to the public], but it is still not something my family wants to talk about, and I am under the impression that they think this thing is some accident.

You're a graduate student, in epidemiology. What has that taught you about the virus?
Everyone talks about the epidemic in the developing world. I do know a lot more about the opportunistic infections as they present in the developing world and they say "Everybody dies, everybody dies." But I am still living. Probably because I live in the U.S.

Did you feel comfortable posing in your underwear?
I do feel comfortable in my undergarments, and I guess for me it was like, "If I am confident in the way that I look then other people will be, too, and it has to start with me." To say that you can be beautiful with or without HIV, with or without the medication is important. I think this is a changing standard of beauty—especially in the HIV positive community. I don't know if that picture is going to help them do that I hope it does.

VERMONT JACOBS, 32
New York City
Diagnosed 1999

You're a professional model. How has HIV affected your career?
Your body goes through different changes because of the disease. Your immune system breaks down, wasting. Being a model, it is really hard to adjust. Your looks are everything in this business, but if you are strong enough, you can handle it.

How frightened were you when diagnosed?
At the time, they were telling us you could die from the disease. It was so much to think about every day and every night. Even today, there is not a day that you wake up and don't think about it. But it's important to adjust to it. You have to do the best you can to overcome your fear and carry on with your life and move on.

How have you overcome it?
I started working in South Africa working with an organization called Twilight's Children when I was asked to be their spokesperson. They are an organization formed for homeless children and street children. We started with three youths, provided them a roof over their heads, square meals and an education. We formed a real bond with them.

Have you changed sexually too?
You are more aware of what you can and cannot do. And if you want to go into a relationship with someone, [the virus makes you confront] the details you'll have to share with your partner.

RALPH COSOLVO, 45
Marshalls Creek, PA
Diagnosed 1985

Would you describe your diagnosis?
I was a high-risk person, struggling with drug addiction, so I decided to get tested. Even though I had been living the way I lived, I was still in shock. But I had to resolve that in whatever time I had left, I had to do the right thing. I had to look at what I had become, and I had to talk about it. I had to do a lot of fearless searching and more inventory. Learn about my defects and make amends.

What did you realize about yourself while recovering from drugs?
It dug deeper than just simple drug use. The addiction was a spiritual, emotional, physical thing I was experiencing. I was trying to make myself feel better with drugs, fixing my world with something outside myself. My parents had gotten divorced and my father had another family—I felt abandoned. When you're shooting drugs, nothing else matters, and when you do that over the course of so much time, it's a profound change that has to occur in your life for you to be freed from that.

Why is it important for you to tell your story to future sexual partners?
I don't want to be having a secret. You can't build a relationship without being honest. Everybody that knows me knows it. I'm open with everybody.

What are your feelings as we mark the 25th anniversary of AIDS?

I buried a lot of people. I'm totally grateful for the people that went before me, the people who gave their lives up. I am forever indebted to the gay community for what they have done.

DAVID CORBITT, 27
Los Angeles
Diagnosed 2003

How much did you know about HIV just before you were diagnosed?
It was ironic because I was an HIV counselor in college. I was always aware of HIV and the need to be tested. Never did I think I would turn out positive myself, especially since I was practicing safer sex—or so I thought. I had a lot of internalized anger and depression. You'd think I would be really mad at the person who infected me, but I wasn't. My anger was more directed toward myself because I felt like since I was so well educated about this I should have known better. HIV and AIDS have changed so much since the early days. I didn't know, until I got the disease that people could live normally with HIV. That was a big learning curve for me.

What special issues do positive people of color face?
As a person of color, you just never talk about this disease with your friends or your parents. So when you walk up in the club and see people dressed in their hip-hop gear, they don't look like AIDS to any of us. In actuality, so many of us are infected, it's ridiculous. I always thought that AIDS really belonged to the 50 year-old guy in San Francisco. That's why I decided to come out with my status, so people could see my face.

What obstacles confronted you after your diagnosis?
I was abstinent for a bit because I felt so uncomfortable and tainted. It took me a while to get over the fact that I would never have unprotected sex again. A lot of self-acceptance had to happen in order for me to free myself.

What have your relationships been like?
It's funny, but I think I've dated more since I've been HIV positive. Being desirable doesn't have a lot do with your status; it's more about your personality and how ready you are. I don't think I was ready back then, and as I've matured, I've been more ready to date.

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