Rock Steady

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Scene from an AIDS rock opera, circa 1991: Queen frontman Freddie Mercury, 45, goes public about his AIDS status only days before he dies. Cut to the 2001 revival: Chuck Panozzo, 53, bass player for the legendary anthem-rock band Styx, delivers a double whammy -- he is gay and HIV positive -- and then lives to tell the tale.

“I didn’t want to die like a coward like others in the entertainment business,” Panozzo says. “I thought, if I can stare death in the face, I can make it as an openly gay man.” In fact, he did something very un-rock-star-like and signed up to play spokesperson for the Human Rights Campaign’s National Coming Out Project, headlined by its closets-are-for-clothes celebration on October 11. As former poster girl and current project manager Candace Gingrich puts it, “Chuck came to us. It was a no-brainer.”

In its heyday during the late ’70s and early ’80s, Styx was a hit machine. With power ballads like “Come Sail Away” and “Babe,” the band sold 30 million albums worldwide. Panozzo -- who was not out to band members -- says that amid the flung panties and body-part autographs, he never felt pressure to date female groupies. “Some of the guys were married, so their wives kept an eye on them. And if there was anyone fooling around, we all agreed to keep it out of the dressing room. No one shoved the sex in our faces.”

That nonconfrontation comfort zone closed when Panozzo tested positive in 1991. He disclosed to his bandmates and close friends, but settled in to what he now refers to as a “lazy and ignorant” attitude toward his health while he and the group continued their breakneck touring schedule. The wake-up call came in 1998, when Panozzo’s health headed south. Anemic, losing weight and needing a KS lesion removed from his back, he decided to get off the road and into treatment.

“The guys in the band told everyone I was on sabbatical,” he says. “They covered my ass. I was too sick even to talk on the phone and answer people’s questions.” A year later, after recuperating, Panozzo witnessed a longtime friend die of AIDS -- an event that spurned him to start making some noise about his own struggle.

Having just mapped a successful 40-city tour with Styx, Panozzo plans on spending more time in his Chicago home and stretching his limbs as a gay and AIDS advocate. “I want everyone to know how positive my coming out has been,” he says. “We have a legion of fans who now have to question their values because of me. I’m happier than I’ve been in my entire life.”

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