The Justice League

The 6 Superheroes of 2004

January 1, 2005 By David Thorpe

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1. Mighty Matthew

Gymnast Matthew Cusick, 33, (right) took on artsy acrobats Cirque du Soleil when they fired him in 2003 for having HIV. Last summer, the troupe apologized—to the tune of $600,000. So he's flying high, right? Sort of.

Now that your complaint against Cirque is behind you, what are you up to?
I perform with AntiGravity, an on-the-go New York troupe similar to Cirque.

What are your plans for the $600,000? A new car? A cruise?
People think a settlement is like winning the lottery. I have to pay the legal expenses and taxes, and—wouldn't you know it—I am now without health insurance and pay for meds out of pocket. So by the time all this is over with, I will maybe be able to put some away.

How has the experience of standing up to Cirque changed your life?
It was a gruesome and humiliating experience that I don't wish on anyone. Fortunately, my inner strength allowed me to come out of this experience a stronger person.

Has the publicity at least enhanced your dating life?
The reason for my fight was not to enhance my dating life. It was to help stop the stigma and discrimination of HIV. But thanks for asking—I'm single.

What advice would you give people with HIV facing discrimination?
Don't let anyone trample on your rights. One person with a great deal of determination can help make a change in our world.

So what's it like to fly through the air when you perform?
It feels like I'm free.

Cusick fans, visit www.Matthewcusick.com.

2. Violeta Ross

2004 was a banner year for Violeta Ross, 27, and REDBOL, Bolivia's HIVer network. With Ross as

its most public face—she spoke at the International AIDS Conference's closing ceremonies in Bangkok—REDBOL salvaged Bolivia's floundering Global Fund application and won $14 million in grants. Last January, Ross told *POZ* her New Year's resolution was to find a husband. Now? "I don't have time," she says.

3. Jonathan Perry

Last February, when North Carolina officials announced a mini-explosion of HIV on its college campuses—many historically black—only one infected student spoke out. On *Oprah* and elsewhere, Johnson C. Smith University's Jonathan Perry, 27, denounced the homophobia and ignorance fueling unsafe sex on black campuses. Though Perry has graduated, he remains an activist: "My commitment is to these students," he says, "until the epidemic is over."

4. Juanita Williams

Juanita Williams, 49, a New York microbicide advocate, was the lone openly positive speaker at April's 2004 March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC. Her rousing words exposed the mainstream, million-strong crowd to the notion that HIV is a reproductive-rights issue and the need for a "women-controlled way" to stop the virus. "It was surreal," says the grandmother of three, who spoke shortly after Hillary Clinton. "I never thought I'd have a voice that loud."

5. Peter Staley

ACT UP veteran and HIVer Peter Staley, 43, rebounded from his own crystal meth addiction to alert New Yorkers to the link between the drug and rising HIV rates. Last January, he paid for an in-your-face ad campaign, with the slogan **Buy Crystal, Get HIV Free!** By March, the city had ponied up $300,000 for anti-crystal efforts and gay Gothamites gabbed of little else. Staley recently helped launch a more upbeat Crystal-Free Is Sexy campaign. "I'm clean," Staley says, "but I still struggle."

6. Catherine Kapusta-Palmer

France's long-overdue summit on women and AIDS (in 2003, 43 percent of new HIV infections in France were women) featured female HIVers at the podium instead of neggie politicos and experts, thanks largely to one of its organizers—Catherine Kapusta, 42, one of a handful of publicly positive French women. "Usually, the women just listen," says Kapusta, who was energized by the turnout. "Women showed up and said, 'We want to fight.'"

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