The POZ Decade-1996

May 1, 2004 By Staff

The Cocktail Party

The Year That Changed Everything began on a cautious note: “Three-Drug Therapy May Suppress HIV,” the Wall Street Journal ventured in January. Meanwhile, HIVers who had started such a “cocktail” with Invirase (saquinavir), the first protease approved in late 1995 at what turned to be a too-weak dose, were losing what little bang it offered.

Then in the first half of 1996 came—jackpot!—Crixivan (indinavir), Norvir (ritonavir) and Viramune (nevirapine), not to mention a test for a crucial new measure called viral load. It seemed that after 15 years of sickness and death, there were finally drugs that worked. At that summer’s world AIDS conference, in Vancouver, everyone from treatment activists to stock analysts were giddy over data showing near-miraculous turnarounds and undetectable viral loads (see “Eradication,” below). “That conference was just buzzing with optimism and hope,” recalls HIVer Tim Horn, who had written *POZ*’s first major story on the revolutionary protease drugs only a few months before. “Suddenly, we were talking with a whole new vocabulary, about how reducing viral load was the key. Even my most cynical activist friends were elated.”

He wasn’t the only optimist. By year’s end, *Newsweek*’s cover dared to ask “The End of AIDS?” echoing a media chorus joined by writer Andrew Sullivan, a new cocktail-taker himself, who wondered in a November *New York Times Magazine* essay how the gay world, long traumatized by the epidemic, would adjust to life without AIDS—to young men once seen “hobbling along, their cheekbones poking out of their skin...suddenly restored into some strange spectacle of health.” The piece, which many activists called the hopes of a privileged Pollyanna, was titled “When Plagues End.”

Of course, the plague didn’t end. It exploded around the world, most of which couldn’t afford treatments that wholesaled at $15,000 per year per patient. Often, they barely worked in HIVers who had developed resistance to earlier meds like AZT. And don’t even mention the side effects. (In early ’97, *POZ* forecast much of the trouble to come in the story shown above [image not available], by Mike Barr.) Yet AIDS deaths in the U.S. eventually dropped 70 percent after 1996—a year when, Horn recalls, “there was a feeling that everything was going to be OK.”

Man of the Year: Magic Johnson

Earvin “Magic” Johnson has always baffled a bit—not just with his wizardly moves on the court, but with his own feelings about being the world’s most famous person with HIV. *POZ*’s 1996 June/July

cover story chronicled the Hall of Famer's final, short-lived return to the L.A. Lakers—and what some perceived as his reluctance to take a more public stand on AIDS issues. "He's not using his power to change anything," snapped author-activist Larry Kramer, to which the six-foot-nine legend replied with quiet defiance, "I'm doing more than anyone, [so] I don't care what people say."

In fact, since his 1991 press conference at which he shattered forever the nation's delusion that only "other people" get HIV, he not only made an NBA comeback but dramatically resigned as head of the National Commission on AIDS, saying that President George Bush had "dropped the ball" on HIV.

Not so for Magic: By the mid-'90s, the enterprising entrepreneur had opened an HIV-research foundation and a network of testing centers while dragging retailers like Starbucks into underserved communities of color. In 2002, he appeared in a massive GlaxoSmithKline campaign affirming that treatment was helping him live healthy with HIV. Soon after, he cleared up wife Cookie's 1997 remark to *Ebony* that "The Lord has definitely healed Earvin," which famously helped fuel public confusion about HIV. "I'm not cured by any stretch of the imagination," Magic, 44, told *POZ* in 2003. "I don't have any magic drug no one else has."

But he does have the star power to captivate audiences of black and Latino teens to whom he preaches prevention, telling them he got HIV "because I had unprotected sex. Don't mess up your life in a night." *His* life, no surprise, still centers around b-ball: He co-owns the Lakers, and he hosted the MTV "street ball" reality/game show "Who's Got Game" in 2003—the same year he caught up with *POZ* to say, "I wear my status as a badge of honor."

'96 Personal Best
Look Who's Talking by Shawn Decker

In 1996, at 20, I decided to go public with my HIV. A hemophiliac, I was only 11 when diagnosed and can remember thinking If *I shut up, maybe the virus will go away*. Nine years later, I realized it wasn't going to—but nor was I anytime soon, so I'd better get a life. I considered pursuing music like my idols Depeche Mode, whom I'd met through the Make-a-Wish Foundation. But I was too shy to sing in front of people. So I decided to share my story: HIV sucks, but you can survive it.

After reading article after article by and about HIVers in *POZ*, I wrote to the magazine's publisher, Sean Strub. (I loved that his initials were SOS—almost as good as mine, STD) He invited me to the first *POZ* Life Expo, where I spoke out for the first time. A lightning bolt struck: I'm positive...and I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks about it! Soon, I was on the cover of a special hemophiliac issue of *POZ*.

Since then, I've built a speaking career and found love. (Gwenn and I teach teens about HIV by taking probing questions about our sex life.) Occasionally, I dig out the *POZ* with me smiling on the cover. I love having that vivid chronicle of my most crucial turning point: 1996—the year I embraced my inner positoid.

Shawn Decker, whose “Positoid” column debuted in 1997, lives in Virginia.

BUZZwords: Eradication

It was the most famous—and heartbreakingly unfulfilled—moment in HIV science. At 1996’s world AIDS confab, in Vancouver, David Ho, MD, announced that his team at Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center had likely “completely shut off viral replication” in their patients on protease therapy—and that their few remaining infected cells would “turn over and die, thus presenting the possibility that HIV will be completely eradicated.” Sounds like the Cure, right? Amidst much hope and media hype, Ho was named *Time*’s Man of the Year. All too soon, though, we would learn that HIV lingers— unlike “HIV erdication,” which bites the dust.

Hey! Days

April 29
Rent opens Off-Broadway, transposing the opera *La Bohème* to New York’s gritty, polysexual, AIDS-ravaged East Village. A monster hit, it leaps to Broadway, where it’s still running today.

May 14
The FDA approves Johnson & Johnson’s Confide, the first over-the-counter HIV test you can take in the privacy of your own home. J&J pulls it a year later, citing “lack of consumer demand.”

August
Pressured by a Newt Gingrich–led Congress, President Clinton signs a sweeping welfare-reform bill that forces even sick PWAs to work or go without. Earlier in the year, on a similarly nasty note, Congress had passed a motion (later repealed) to give the boot to HIVers in the military.

September 26
On TV’s *ER*, physician’s assistant Jeanie Boulet (Gloria Reuben) learns she has HIV—and keeps treating patients. *POZ* gives props to the program’s realistic take on risk.

October 11
Nine years and 40,000 panels after its genesis, the AIDS Memorial Quilt unfurls in DC for the first time in four years, attracting 1 million visitors—plus Bill and Al, the only prez and VP ever to view it.

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