The POZ Decade-1998

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Black Emergency

It was unanimous—every black leader we interviewed for our special January 1999 “State of Emergence” issue on the black AIDS crisis had run out of patience. For 15 years, black HIV infections had grown at increasingly disproportionate rates, and everyone—from San Francisco mayor Willie Brown to our cover subject, Washington, DC’s Rev. Rainey Cheeks—wondered how many more would die before the federal government and the black community at large would act. (Cheeks, for one, had already acted: Back in 1985, he founded DC’s first black gay ASO, Us Helping Us).

Finally, in the spring of 1998, black AIDS advocates invited themselves to the table. Congressional Black Caucus chair Rep. Maxine Waters—who told *POZ* that her sister was seriously ill with AIDS—demanded that Clinton’s health secretary, Donna Shalala, announce a public- health emergency in the black community. Shalala responded in typically compromised Clintonese, downgrading “emergency” to “a crisis for every American.” That October, Congress earmarked $130 million for HIV treatment and education for black Americans—a victory, but considerably less money than had been hoped for.

How much has changed since? Black advocates continue to tackle their community’s fears and prejudices—from homophobia, which keeps many black men on the down low, to mistrust of the medical establishment. African-American women are particularly hard hit: They account for 64 percent of new HIV infections. But HIVer Phill Wilson, executive director of the Black AIDS Institute, says there’s been progress since the first national black AIDS summit organized by HIVer Mario Cooper in 1996. “There’s been a huge shift in how AIDS is perceived in black institutions, [especially] black-owned media,” he says. Wilson cites increased advocacy and services, adding, “almost everyone knows someone who has died from or is living with the disease.” Black churches have joined the fight, too, acknowledging the impact the disease has had on their congregations. (The pioneering Cheeks launched a queer-friendly ministry back in 1993.)

But as American advocates focus on global AIDS, Wilson knows the battle is far from over. Indeed, a 2002 CDC report found that African Americans accounted for *half* of the 42,000 new AIDS cases diagnosed annually in the United States.“ [AIDS] is a global problem,” Wilson says, “but last time I checked, Watts and Brooklyn and South LA are a part of the globe.”

Man of the Year: John Kelly

When *POZ* put John Kelly on its cover in May 1998, it was the first time the actor-singer-dancer-writer-drag performer had spoken publicly about his HIV positive diagnosis. “There was virtually no reaction!” says the candid, amiable artist. “Maybe I was preaching to the converted.”

Kelly was, in fact, already known for his AIDS-themed performance pieces, but he was more famous for his Joni Mitchell act. As far back as 1984, Kelly had been “doing” Mitchell in performances as loving as they were satirical. This, along with Kelly’s expressive countertenor, won him accolades both from the mainstream—he opened for Natalie Merchant in 2000—and New York’s downtown theater scene, whence he sprang. When Kelly appeared in John Dugdale’s signature blue-tinted photo on *POZ*’s cover, he told us he didn’t want to be pigeonholed as Mitchell. These days, Kelly says, “If it could pay my rent, I’d willingly get pegged as Joni.”

But Kelly has hardly languished since 1998. He did a stint on Broadway with Christopher Walken in James Joyce’s *The Dead* in 2000/2001, won a prestigious $50,000 Herb Alpert Foundation grant for dance/performance in 2002, and last February performed a retrospective, *The Skin I’m In*. Though HIV hasn’t figured prominently in his work in recent years, it has shaped his personal life. “Dating sucks,” Kelly says. “Disclosure’s practically nonexistent—unless I bring it up. I’ve coexisted so successfully with this disease, but that’s been the biggest bugaboo.” As for meeting *meds*, Kelly has been luckier: He takes the same combo he started in 1998 and has faced no serious health problems. And even dating’s not quite as bad as Kelly makes it out to be: He has just fallen in love with a guy who’s positive. Meanwhile, an ever-so-slightly boyish-looking Joni Mitchell was seen in March performing at a downtown New York hot spot. Where he belongs.

’98 Personal Best
Tears at Tiffany’s by Kevin Bentley

How about rings?” It was five days before Christmas 1998, and my lover, Paul, and I were talking about gifts. For a decade, Decembers had conjured grief over the two boyfriends I’d lost to AIDS, Jack and Richard, both of whom became seriously ill around the holidays. But now, I was deep into two very happy years with Paul.

“You mean wedding bands?” he said, surprised.

The next day, we found ourselves gazing up at the stone façade of Tiffany’s in downtown San Francisco. Above the door, a verdigris Atlas hoisted an antique clock face. Time: That’s what this was all about, wasn’t it? As a long-term nonprogressor, I always wondered if mine was running out.

In the museumlike hush of the store, we stood under glittering chandeliers and examined rings, easily agreeing on a pair of wide gold bands. We returned for the sized rings on Christmas Eve. On the quiet landing of the store’s marble stairs, we paused spontaneously, fished the boxes out of their turquoise bags, took out the bands and met each other’s gaze, flushed and teary. “I love you,” we both said, slipping the rings onto each other’s fingers, then kissing. I had decided to believe in my future—and pledge it, one more time, to another.

Kevin Bentley has been a contributor to POZ since 2003 and lives in San Francisco.

BUZZwords: Adherence

Sure, it sounds dull, but back in 1998 *adherence* was serious business. Historically, taking (or not taking) your meds has always been called *compliance*. However, in the grand tradition of PWA empowerment dating from those hallowed Denver Principles (see “Hey! Days,” 2003), AIDS activists, journalists and HIVers blanched at the term’s “do what you’re told” connotation. So our take-*no*-shit crowd insisted on the more active adherence. See also: the medically correct “You failed on your combo,” which became “My combo failed *me*.”

Hey! Days

March 27
HIVers whose libidos go limp from meds discover Pfizer’s new “erectile dysfunction” pill, Viagra—but concerns about the drug’s interactions with poppers and HAART leave some lovers at half-mast.

April 21
President Clinton refuses to lift a ban on needle-exchange funds, infuriating activists. The backstage gossip? U.S. drug czar General Barry McCaffrey threatened to resign over the issue.

May
Miss America 1998 Kate Shindle makes youth HIV prevention her queenly mission. When school districts try to muzzle her, she tells *POZ*, “Sometimes I feel like I’m banging my head against the wall.”

August 13
“No obits” boasts the cover of the *Bay Area Reporter* —for the first time since 1982, the San Francisco gay weekly has no AIDS deaths to report. The announcement becomes a joyful symbol of the protease era.

November 13
The government compensates the approximately 10,000 hemophiliacs infected with HIV due to lax government regulation with the new $750 million Ricky Ray Hemophilia Fund. But hemophiliac HIVers struggle for years to actually get the money.

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