Where the Heart Is

Wilfredo Valencia-Palacios works El Salvador's streets

August 1, 1996 By Becky Minnich

In 1980 Wilfredo Valencia-Palacios' family fled to the U.S. from El Salvador's civil war. Fourteen years later -- after coming of age in San Francisco's Latino gay community, fighting against U.S. intervention in Central America and testing positive for HIV in 1988 -- Valencia announced to his physician, "I'm returning to El Salvador" to fight another war: The one on AIDS. He was told he'd probably only live three months. "My doctor thought I was totally crazy. My T-cell count was 230 and I had just stopped AZT after two years." Valencia wavered on his decision to return to his birth-city of San Salvador until he went there to attend his mother's funeral. He was deeply struck by the civil war's effect on his people -- particularly the rampant prostitution and the spread of HIV in the streets. After a dozen propositions, Valencia says, "I asked if they were using condoms. I asked, 'What do you know about HIV and AIDS?' Everybody just looked at me like I had said something prohibited and sinful." It was then that Valencia decided to return and begin the kind of outreach work that in this part of the world can get you killed. Like in November 1994.

Valencia was leaving a downtown bar where he'd been looking after a seriously ill sex-worker who'd been turned away by an AIDS-phobic hospital staff when two men pulled up in a black car and asked, "Are you the one who's been handing out condoms?" When Valencia replied yes, they got out of the car and began shooting. A terrifying chase ensued. The men were from the notorious right-wing death squad Sombra Negra (Black Shadow). Palacios barely escaped with his life. "That night I cried a lot. But if I went back to the U.S., I'd be doing exactly what [the death squads] want me to do. We are human beings. We have the right to health care, education and respect."

Today Valencia has won not only the respect but the trust of San Salvador's street-hardened sex-workers with his winning smile, gentle humor and box of condoms always on hand -- part of an HIV education project he started. As for the "three months" his physician gave him? He's thinking about writing to his U.S. doctor. "I'd say, well, it's been more than two years now and I've survived the bad water, the mosquitoes and the death squads. I'd say I'm ready for at least another 10."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Where-the-Heart-Is-1811-4970