



Against All Odds

Les Wright is working on a book project on fellow long-term survivors.

June 23, 2021 By Les Wright

I was infected with HIV in 1981 and tested positive in 1986. The doctors at UCSF [University of California San Francisco] told me to get my affairs in order and prepare to die. I was diagnosed with AIDS in 1991 and spent two years waiting to die, all while I kept working on my PhD at UC Berkeley. I graduated in 1992. Tired of doing nothing and not dying, I went back to work in 1993. I got that rare thing: a tenure-track professorship at a small liberal arts college in Boston. I researched, wrote and edited two books on gay bears. I married my husband in a same-sex civil union in Vermont in 2002. When I got sick again in 2004, I decided to move back to my beloved San Francisco. When I sadly divorced my husband in 2010, I found I could no longer afford to live in the city. After bouncing around for a few years, I wound up back in rural, arch-conservative central New York, where I grew up. I now live in low-income senior housing in downtown Cortland, New York, and am working on a book-length project of first-person stories of fellow long-term survivors.

What three adjectives best describe you?

indefatigable, compassionate, wise.

What is your greatest achievement?

Not just surviving, but prevailing, against all odds.

What is your greatest regret?

Not minoring in math—I did not realize it is next to impossible to make a living as a humanities scholar. Who knew computers would be the wave of the future?

What keeps you up at night?

Chronic, lifelong insomnia.

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?

Criminalizing AIDS-phobia.

What is the best advice you ever received?

Be true to yourself and follow your passion.

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?

Magic Johnson.

What drives you to do what you do?

Endless curiosity about the world I live in and the desire to understand more fully.

What is your motto?

“From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?

My cat.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?

A cat in ancient Egypt. I'd like to know what it's like to be worshipped.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

<http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/against-odds>