Aging With HIV

Long-term survivors share their journeys.

August 14, 2023 By Alicia Green

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In the beginning of the AIDS crisis, the idea of aging with HIV was, at best, a distant dream. Getting an AIDS diagnosis in the very early days of the epidemic was indeed a death sentence for many people. Despite the fact that effective treatment in the mid-1990s reversed that reality, the general public still seems surprised by our aging.

The stigma attached to having HIV and the misbelief that living with the virus remains a death sentence help explain why folks have trouble accepting our longevity. As a result, it remains necessary to uplift the stories of long-term survivors. That is why we created this photo essay.

More than half of people living with HIV in the United States today are 50 or older. By 2030, 70% of folks with the virus nationwide will be 50 or older. HIV prevention efforts and access to health care and treatment have helped transform the face of HIV and AIDS from young to old.

In these portraits, POZ celebrates that success story. Some folks getting older with the virus are faring better than others, but all of us can share in the celebration. The five subjects highlighted (in alphabetical order)—John Hanning, Jay Lassiter, Monique Mackey, Joyce McDonald and Javier Morales—are strong examples of people aging gracefully with HIV.

Many thanks to photographer Daymion Mardel and stylist John Slattery, as well as many others, who donated their time and talent to making our five subjects into literal models. Why shouldn't people aging with HIV look and feel special? We can't think of a reason.

Meet five long-term survivors with unique stories to tell.

John Hanning, Velvet/satin kimono (silk/rayon) and printed shirt (100% silk) by Pierre-Louis MasciaPhotography by Daymion Mardel / Styling by John Slattery

JOHN HANNING

In 1995, John Hanning went to the doctor after experiencing serious symptoms. He was losing weight, had a terrible cough and could barely stand. Two weeks later, he was diagnosed with AIDS and given six months to live.

“I was told that I needed to decide what I wanted to happen to my remains,” says Hanning, a 62-year-old visual and literary artist from New York City. “I said, ‘I’m going to get better and get back to living my life.’ I did exactly what I said I was going to do.”

Despite tough odds, Hanning kept fighting. As new treatments emerged, Hanning’s body responded well to them. He had work he didn’t want to leave behind unfinished. He knew his story wasn’t over.

“I started blossoming again,” Hanning says. “When I was able and strong enough, I got back to making work.”

One of his most important pieces is *I Survived AIDS*. Created in 2012, the poster features Hanning as a child. Its popularity has earned him international attention.

“When I say I survived AIDS, it’s something that we’re all surviving,” Hanning says.

John Hanning, AIDS suit model's ownPhotography by Daymion Mardel / Styling by John Slattery

In 2015, Hanning released his first book, *Unfortunate Male*, that reflects on his diagnosis. His second book, *Yonder*, explores his life as a queer person before and during the AIDS epidemic.

Today, Hanning has an undetectable viral load. He takes meds for HIV and for cholesterol. He visits the doctor about every four months and sees a therapist once a month. Fitness and diet are very important to him as well.

"I look at it like I'm a car," Hanning says. "I've got to check the oil and all these parts to keep it running. Then, there's my work. If I didn't have my work, I wouldn't be here. That's what gives me solace."

As Hanning reflects on his journey aging with HIV, he's reminded that he was given a second chance. That chance has rewarded him with the opportunity to share his work with others.

He calls himself and other long-term survivors "living archives." They are the connection to the past and present.

"We have history to share," Hanning says. "We are historical documents that the world cannot forget. We have to keep the story alive."

Jay Lassiter, A.Potts FW23 CollectionPhotography by Daymion Mardel / Styling by John Slattery

JAY LASSITER

Throughout the early to mid-1990s, Jay Lassiter got tested for HIV several times. But he never

returned for his results. Lassiter wasn't diagnosed with HIV until 1997. By then, he'd been living with the virus for at least five years.

"I followed the promise of legalized weed out to California and that was when I confronted it for the first time because all I needed was a letter of diagnosis," says Lassiter, a 51-year-old writer and community organizer from New Jersey. "I knew in my heart and underneath all that denial that I was HIV positive."

Lassiter found community at the cannabis dispensaries. It's where he met other people living with HIV and learned resilience.

"We were exchanging knowledge and tips," he recalls. "We were gambling on our longevity. We took a chance, and I won. I'm still here."

Lassiter has come a long way since being diagnosed. At first, he didn't take HIV meds. Then, when he started treatment with those early meds, he was the sickest he'd ever been. But he was grateful because at least he wasn't dying.

Jay Lassiter, Black & white glen plaid three-piece suit from Inherent by Taylor DraperPhotography by Daymion Mardel / Styling by John Slattery

“Most of my illnesses, challenges and physical obstacles that I had to overcome have been a result of the side effects of my early meds or medicating on drugs and alcohol,” he says.

Lassiter has had an undetectable viral load for a long time. He’s currently on a one-pill-a-day regimen that he loves. His secret to remaining healthy is fitness, diet, cannabis and laughter.

“The price of longevity is staying healthy into old age, and that’s a big fight,” he says. “I’m not going to die of AIDS, but I don’t want to die of other diseases.”

Living with HIV has also given Lassiter a voice. In 2003, he started a blog to share his story. It has allowed him to be honest and open. It has also opened the door for him to write about things he is passionate about, including medical marijuana and needle exchanges.

“HIV has propelled my fight for queer liberty, gay marriage and all the LGBTQ events that have come in the last 20 years,” he says. “I am more of an authority because of my outspokenness about my HIV status.”

Monique Mackey, Printed dress (100% silk) and trouser by Pierre-Louis MasciaPhotography by Daymion Mardel / Styling by John Slattery

MONIQUE MACKEY

In 1982, Monique Mackey was born with HIV. But she wasn't diagnosed until she was 12 years old. Mackey's whole world changed that one day in 1994.

"I was adopted at birth, but I didn't know until that point," says Mackey, 41, who lives in New York City. "It was a double whammy of 'You're HIV positive and you're adopted.'"

Mackey didn't disclose her status until four years later. At a young age, she felt stigmatized because of how doctors treated her. But at age 16, she started transitioning and felt empowered.

"When I got back to myself, I wanted to raise awareness of HIV," she says. "I used it as more of a learning tool than trying to keep it hidden from the world."

She thought her experience as a trans person living with HIV could prove helpful to others. Mackey now dedicates much of her time to helping the transgender and HIV communities.

"My story is a love letter to my community," she says. "I want my community to know that they're valid and worthy of everything they want and more."

Monique Mackey, Silk charmeuse anorak duster by Carlton JonesPhotography by Daymion Mardel / Styling by John Slattery

Mackey's journey hasn't always been easy. As a sex worker and substance user, she struggled to stay on her HIV medication. "It makes me more appreciative now that I'm able to go to my pill bottle every day and take a pill," she says.

Her viral load has been undetectable for almost 10 years. Self-care is very important to her too. That's why she does something just for herself every week.

For Mackey, being a long-term survivor means being alive and not being broken. The only concern she has about aging with HIV is dying before seeing an end to the virus.

In the meantime, she continues to pave the way for the next generation of trans people as a trans health navigator supporting trans people seeking gender-affirming surgeries.

"I'm in one of the best places I've ever been," Mackey says. "I'm in a loving relationship with another human who loves me as much as I love them. Going from sex work and drug use every day of my life to doing the normal nine-to-five has been eye-opening and life-changing."

The reverend Joyce McDonald, APotts CollectionPhotography by Daymion Mardel / Styling by John Slattery

JOYCE McDONALD

When Joyce McDonald was diagnosed with HIV in 1995, life had already thrown many challenges her way. She experienced loss and trauma and, as a mother of two, battled substance use.

“By the time I took the HIV test, I had accepted Christ,” says McDonald, an artist and minister from New York City. “I got detoxed and was in a better place.”

Even after her diagnosis, McDonald, who is now 72, remained faithful. She remembered how God had helped her through all the other trials in her life.

It would take McDonald 14 years to start on HIV meds. Her doctor would offer them, but she would say she was already taking some—healing Bible scriptures.

In 2009, McDonald became an ordained minister. She was set to take on a bigger role at church when she got shingles. The shingles attacked her body. After talking to her doctor, she knew it was time to get on meds.

“I started taking medication then, and I prayed about side effects,” she says. “I haven’t felt any yet.”

Joyce McDonald, Bamboo turtleneck by Carlton Jones and print skirt model's own Photography by Daymion Mardel / Styling by John Slattery

McDonald has an undetectable viral load. Although her HIV is under control, she suffers from neuropathy and heel fat pad syndrome. That's when the pads that cushion your heels shrink or lose elasticity, giving rise to pain.

But her faith continues to guide her. She reads the Bible and shares it with others. She also makes art, including sculptures and paintings, to help people heal.

"My art not only explores the pain and hurt of my former life but also the joy and triumph of my present one," McDonald says.

Last year, McDonald was one of the first artists to join West Elm's new ceramics residency in Brooklyn. Her art has also been featured in the New York Times and on the New York City cable news channel NY1. "It's just beyond my wildest dreams," she says.

For McDonald, living this long after her diagnosis has been a blessing. It also has allowed her to fulfill her purpose as an artist and minister. Long-term survivorship has given her the opportunity to watch her daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren grow up.

Javier Morales, Hara coat (100% cotton brushed terry) by Nicholas KPhotography by Daymion Mardel / Styling by John Slattery

JAVIER MORALES

When Javier Morales was diagnosed with HIV in 2001, he was prepared to fight the virus. For years, he had been fighting for people living with HIV. In 1994, Morales helped found POZ with his partner, Sean Strub. He was also the associate publisher of POZ en Español.

“There were so many things going on at the time, like 9/11,” says Morales, age 59, of Milford, Pennsylvania. “But I was lucky. I had the best HIV doctor in the world, Joseph Sonnabend.”

The late Sonnabend was a pioneering AIDS physician. He started Morales on medication right away. Early treatment saved Morales from becoming ill. He has had an undetectable viral load since shortly after his diagnosis.

“I’ve never had any serious health problems,” he says. “I’m fortunate to have a partner and family and friends, but I also realized that not everyone is so fortunate.”

He never takes being alive for granted. Part of that means taking care of his health by staying fit, following a proper diet and taking his meds.

Even with support, Morales has experienced stigma. As a result, he spent years in the “HIV closet.” He’s no longer in that closet, but he’s never shared his story this openly.

Javier Morales, Print dinner jacket from Inherent by Taylor Draper and white shirt from Lorenzo UomoPhotography by Daymion Mardel / Styling by John Slattery

“I’m a very private person,” Morales says. “I hope by doing this that more people will come out of the HIV closet. Then, more barriers to stigma will be broken down.”

Morales fights stigma through such organizations as the Sero Project and LatinX+. The Sero Project fights HIV criminalization and other social injustices. LatinX+ is a network of Latinos living with HIV and their allies in the United States and Puerto Rico, which is Morales's native home.

When he's not fighting for people living with HIV, Morales enjoys his life with Strub and their dog, Alfie.

Morales is also passionate about his nonprofit, Pike Opera. His love for opera dates back to his childhood in Puerto Rico. On August 27, his organization will host its annual opera event for the public in Milford.

"Anyone who says opera is dead should come to Milford the last weekend in August and experience the magic of opera," Morales says.
