# Busting HIV Stigma Through Photos and Stories

*And So It Happened* profiles people taking HIV treatment and PrEP.

May 20, 2019 By Trent Straube

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Photographer Francesco Di Benedetto's project And So It Happened includes interviews with and portraits of people living with HIV and on treatment as well as folks who are taking Truvada as PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, to prevent HIV. The results are at once intimate, inspiring, educational and mesmerizing. They're posted on his website, fdibenedetto.com, and on Facebook and Instagram under @andsoithappened.theproject. (Samples from the Instagram feed are posted at the end of this article.)

"I believe that speaking openly about these issues and sharing real-life experiences can help fight the stigma," Di Benedetto says.

Francesco Di BenedettoCourtesy of Jay Matthews

He prefers photographing his subjects at their homes or other locations important to them. The accompanying text is adapted from questionnaires. Since October 2017, about 80 people have posed and told their stories in New York, San Francisco and other cities. Next, Di Benedetto hopes to expand the project to Europe.

Originally from Italy, he moved to New York City in 2012. During a trip to Rome, while telling friends and family about his PrEP regimen, he learned that many people couldn't access the med and that lots of folks disregard U=U (the fact that undetectable HIV is sexually untransmittable). When a friend with the virus relayed that life with HIV in Italy is still hard, Di Benedetto tells POZ, he realized "living in New York City had put me in sort of a bubble."

In the spirit of "doing what's in your power to build a better society," he launched And So It Happened. The title, he says, "looks at the fact that something happened as a starting point for a broader and more articulate discussion. What happens next?"

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“I believe I contracted the virus in D.C. from a man I didn’t know. We had a ”quickie“ that I quite enjoyed at the time. Little did I know that day would change my life forever. Soon after I began to get increasingly sick, experiencing flu-like symptoms lasting 2-3 weeks. I knew something had to be wrong with my body but I was unsure if it was seasonal sickness or a disease. I decided a month later to get tested at my local clinic in Northern Virginia. That day my life changed when I received my HIV diagnosis. I have now been HIV positive for 4 years and undetectable for over 3 years straight. ~ My life has changed in many ways but the most valuable thing I receive is the State and County benefits allocated for HIV positive individuals. I currently receive housing assistance which has prevented me from homelessness and eviction. I also receive great care from my Infectious Disease Specialist at least 4 times a year. My current regimen is a single Genvoya pill once daily, which has maintained my undetectable status. ~ PrEP is an awesome tool that HIV negative people can take to at least ease their fears of contracting the virus. But many people still look down at those who are Poz or on PrEP, feeling that it’s a sign of promiscuity.” ~ Omare, 26, undetectable. Poughkeepsie, NY. Fashion Designer and Data Specialist for Planned Parenthood

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Mark: I am a gay man who moved to Los Angeles when I was 20 years old, in 1981. It was the end of the gay sexual revolution, although we didn't know it at the time, and the dawn of the age of AIDS. I have no idea who might have infected me, and that's just as well. It doesn't matter. There were no medications when I tested HIV positive. As they came along, I took them, always hopeful that I would survive until the next medication was approved. Now, finally, I live in a time when there are more medications to treat my HIV than I will ever need. Any difficult life event, if you allow it, teaches us compassion and empathy for other people. Nothing can really make the tragedy of AIDS worthwhile, but I am grateful for being involved in decades of activism and the truly heroic people I have met along the way. — Michael: On Nov 26, 2005, I was the victim of a sexual assault. My HIV infection resulted from that action. Afterward, I lost trust in others and in my own ability to make good decisions. I am grateful to have had access to health care

coverage and medications. Today, I live fearlessly, but with a new understanding of the good and the bad people are capable of. I found the most amazing man and we were married in 2015. I currently take Descovy and Isentress. — Mark: The most interesting thing to me about PrEP is the fact that is allows people who are HIV negative to take concrete action to protect themselves. For too long, the burden and sole responsibility for containing the spread of HIV has fallen on those of us living with the virus. We have been viewed as little more than vectors of disease and a problem that must be managed. Clearly, with 50,000 new infections each year in the US, this approach has not worked. PrEP changes that. — Michael: PrEP has not changed my relationship with sexuality, but I believe I would not be positive today if PrEP were available to me in 2005. — Mark, 57, undetectable. Long-term survivor living in Baltimore with his husband and two cats, Henry and Charlotte. Writer and LGBT activist. — Michael, 54, undetectable. Working for the federal government.

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“I was diagnosed in 1994. Back then I was in and out of jail and drug treatment programs because of crack/cocaine. After a while I realized how I contracted the virus: rape. It took me some time to accept it and educate myself and my family. They never turned their backs on me. My children are in this fight with me and have themselves become advocates. I’ve been on a deathbed; however, God has seen differently because here I am 24yrs later. Now campaigning for U=U and living my life to the fullest. I’m a full time employee, college student, caregiver for my dad, raising my grandsons and a single parent to two beautiful daughters. I am an advocate for those who don’t have a voice. I post photos of me freely to show my face and let others know they’re not alone in this fight. I hold my heart up and proud living with AIDS, not caring what others have to say. I love and die by my quote: “I know my status, what about you?” ~ My life has changed drastically since my diagnosis. At first I had to go through so many trials and tribulations. My dad treating me differently, he’d pull out plastic plates for me and use ammonia every time I used the bathroom. It wasn’t until he saw me almost dying that he accepted me being HIV+. Now he drinks from my cup, hugs and kisses me. He continues to love me unconditionally. My children don’t see me any differently; in fact they get on my case if I ever slip and forget to take my medications. Living with AIDS is not a death sentence anymore. I give back what was given to me: unconditional love and the ability to teach the next generation. So I tip my hat off to AIDS because it hasn’t and will not win. Not on my time. My illness is very manageable for the most part; I take one pill a day, Stribild, and attend mental health therapy. ~ I’m glad that PrEP is around because it’s given me the opportunity to educate my partner. He’s asked me plenty of questions and has made a decision to seek more information on his own so that he can get on it. PrEP has been keeping others negative and safe. ~ My name is Maria; I’m a 50yrs old Latina

working as a case manager and living in the Bronx, NY”

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“I decided to take PrEP because I wanted to take care of myself and my body. I wanted to have a little more sense of security when it came to being someone who is on my sexual liberation journey. One other part is mainly around safety. As a trans femme, this world is not the safest and, after having been sexually assaulted, I wanted to be able to protect myself in case of an incident like that happening again. ~ I get my Truvada for free from the health clinic I go to. After I started taking it, I have had an extra sense of security. This also helps when it comes to using a condom since, as we all know, condoms can break or rip or just not work. Having Truvada as a back up when it comes to having sexual encounters with undetectable/positive people really helps.” ~ Rexy, 21, on PrEP. San Francisco, CA. Drag Activist, Trans Woman, and Drag mother

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“I started taking PrEP because my best friend from Uni’s husband is HIV+ and my bestie told me that he was taking Truvada. This was back in 2011 and I asked if people without HIV+ partners could take it. When I got back to the US from London in 2014, I asked the clinic for PrEP. So I guess I found out about it in 2011, but didn’t start it until 2014. I take it as a precaution. I’ve had partners lie to me before and I wanted to take all measures to have the safest sex possible so that I could make it as enjoyable as possible. ~ My PCP prescribes me Truvada and I pick it up from Walgreens. My PCP is very sex-positive and she’s queer so she had no problem giving me Truvada. My insurance covers most of the cost of the medicines and then the Gilead Access Program covers the rest of the cost of the medicine so in the end, my Truvada is completely free. ~ To be honest, when I was a lot younger, in my earlier 20s, I did some pretty risky things and that was before Truvada was available. I think if anything, taking Truvada daily is a

reminder that I’m making less riskier sexual decisions these days. It’s really had no change on my sex life. I wouldn’t say that I’ve had more sex with HIV+ people, but I’ve barebacked with someone knowing they’re positive and been super calm because I knew he was undetectable and I’m on PrEP. Sometimes I have safe sex with a condom, and sometimes I don’t but I like knowing that condom or not, my sex is always safer with PrEP. ~ My name is Shamôr, I’m 28 years old. I work as a public civil servant for the federal government. I live in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. I’m black, queer, and Southern but without the accent.”

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“It happened through a past sexual encounter. I’m super thankful to have such supportive family and friends, as they definitely helped keep me emotionally and mentally strong. But I also didn’t allow myself to be sad for too long because what’s done is done. There was nothing I could do about it aside from accepting the situation and continuing to live my life to the fullest. I’m not mad at anyone; we’re all

equally responsible. If anything, I’m more upset with myself. But it is what it is; I’m alive and healthy. That’s all that matters right? I’m currently taking Tivicay and Descovy. ~ Not much has changed because of the infection, to be honest. My dating life has taken quite a blow, not that it was ever prosperous. But a majority of the guys that hit me up are bi and pansexual, who are relatively new to the queer world. They’re coming from a heteronormative society where LGBTQ and sex education are either neglected or extremely out of date. So, many are unaware of HIV, PrEP, and how much medicine has advanced today. Therefore, a lot of them are scared of me, block me, and verbally disrespect me because of my status, despite my being undetectable, which hurts sometimes. ~ PrEP has absolutely brought a change! People are so much more educated about HIV and how it works today. As the years have gone by, the amount of people scared of me has decreased as well. The stigma isn’t as intense now, but there is still so much more work to be done.” ~ Derek Du Jour, 26, undetectable. Brooklyn, NY. Newly lost soul and blogger trying to find their place again in this world

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“I was dating this guy near Fordham. He didn’t tell me he was positive and we had unprotected sex. After I got sick I went back to his place and he was gone. ~ I can say that I’m way more health-conscious now and I also have a higher appreciation for life since I had to fight so hard for it at one time. I try to diet and exercise as best as possible everyday, but starting happy is the key. I’m currently taking Genvoya and it keeps me undetectable. ~ I don’t think that PrEP has had an impact on my sexuality. Some people who are HIV negative don’t care about my condition, but I also find that even some men that are on PrEP are still too scared to even kiss.” ~ Anthony, 28, undetectable. Bronx, NYC. Bartender and music artist

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“I started taking PrEP a few months ago when I became single and started dating again. It just seemed

like a good idea since, as a trans guy, I’m at higher risk for HIV. I learned about PrEP from word-of-mouth experiences when it first became available. I get my prescription from my doctor. I have insurance but it only covers some of the cost so I end up paying like $110 for a three month supply. ~ Prior to transitioning, most of my sexual history was with women so HIV was never much on my radar as something to be concerned about. When I realized (about eleven years ago) that I was interested in men, I always used condoms. But having just gotten out of a long-term relationship with a non-binary AFAB (assigned female at birth) individual, I’ve been more actively exploring my attraction to cisgender men and have found that regular intercourse with someone wearing a condom starts to chafe and hurt after a couple of days. So with guys I sleep with regularly, I prefer unprotected sex since it feels so much better for me. PrEP makes it possible for me to do that and feel safe about it. So far I’ve not had any sexual experiences with anyone who is positive, but I like that PrEP makes it a safe option. ~ I’m Damien. I’m a 41-year-old trans guy and I live in the San Francisco Bay Area. I’m a teacher’s aide for a class of special needs kids. I’m also a drag king and you can frequently find me in SF performing as Scroto T Bagginz.”

A post shared by And so it happened (@andsoithappened.theproject) on Oct 1, 2018 at 2:33pm PDT

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