# My Challenge

In an opinion piece titled "Challenging My Own Bigotry," Brian Gaither, an HIV-negative gay man and cofounder of the Pride Foundation of Maryland, confronts his past behavior. Below is an edited excerpt.

July 1, 2019 By Brian Gaither

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When presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg told the assembled donors of the LGBTQ Victory Fund that he'd struggled with his sexuality so viscerally he wanted to cut it out of himself, I didn't understand.

I've never been that conflicted about being gay, certainly not in a way that caused me such deep emotional pain.

But in his comments, I recognized something I do know. We gay men who are HIV negative very often feel that way about our brethren who are HIV positive. We treat them, collectively, as something we would cut away from ourselves if we could.

From the time I became sexually active in college until many years later, I lived in total fear of HIV. I didn't want it to be any part of my life. I wanted to live in a world of gay men who were HIV negative because gay men with HIV were a threat to "the rest of us."

Eventually, I became aware of what a self-centered bigot I was. The things that I had said, the attitudes they reflected and the ways I had behaved are still used to stigmatize gay men who are HIV positive.

I was 25 years old the first time a friend disclosed his HIV-positive status to me. He got tested. He was dealing with it. Unlike my friend, I was not dealing with it. I felt I'd failed, somehow, to keep the disease at bay. I panicked; I got tested.

Not long after, I was dating a man who was smart, engaging and great in bed. We saw each other off and on for a few months. Then he went silent on me. Many months later I got a call back. He was sorry he'd been out of touch. He'd explain. I knew what he was going to say.

When we stopped seeing each other, it wasn't because of his status. We've been friends for the many years since, and I'm grateful for a relationship that has forced me to constantly challenge my bigotry.

Spending time with him has shown me that HIV isn't something I should want to avoid. Gay men

will always be part of my life, and some of them will be positive. There's nothing about the virus that makes them any less engaging, smart or great in bed.

Since then, I've had a number of relationships with HIV-positive men. Each of them has begun, more or less, the same way. After about three or four dates, there's a pause, then a sigh. "I have to tell you something first."

I'd like to think I've gotten better with my responses. I recognize the hatefulness I once spread and the damage I caused. I've seen it in the eyes of men I've dated when they shared their status. I've sensed it in the anxiety of the moment just before they told me.

I've also heard it in the voices of friends as they recounted stories of being cast aside after coming out as HIV positive. Every time a friend says he genuinely believed that "this guy would be different," I know that his pain is a misery I, another gay man, have inflicted on him.

But we should all know better. HIV is a part of our lives because gay men who are HIV positive are part of our lives. They are our friends, and medical science—including pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and the message of Undetectable Equals Untransmittable, or U=U—has made it easy for us all to be lovers. We continue to discriminate only because we choose to be ignorant.

We owe it to one another to fight the general bigotry against HIV-positive men that persists in gay culture and to accept that each and every one of us could be with a man who makes us happy—regardless of his status.

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