



Changing the HIV Narrative

Straight men living with the virus are speaking up.

January 6, 2025 By [Alicia Green](#)

In July 2024, six straight men served as panelists on a Zoom webinar hosted by The Reunion Project, a nonprofit founded by and for long-term survivors. They shared their journey of living with HIV, specifically as straight men with the virus who have felt forgotten and unheard.

“[The webinar] was a space we wanted just for us to share our experiences on a virtual platform where others could join in,” says Larry Bryant, senior program manager at The Reunion Project, who was one of the panelists.

For Bryant, this was a long time coming. As a straight man living with HIV, he’d never felt a sense of community like this. “It was amazing,” he says. “But in my 20-plus years working in this field, I could count on one hand—and not use all my fingers—the number of times that I’ve been in such a space.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2022, an estimated 31,800 people were newly diagnosed with HIV in the United States. Men who acquired the virus through heterosexual contact accounted for 6% of these cases.

When straight men who became HIV positive through other modes of transmission are included, the proportion of heterosexual men living with the virus is larger than many people realize.

Bryant and other straight men with HIV are hoping to change the narrative and bring awareness to this group, which has often felt neglected or misunderstood within the HIV community.

When Bryant tested positive for HIV in 1986, it was a common misconception that only gay men got the virus. But Bryant was a 19-year-old straight man from Washington, DC, who had just been told he had HIV and only eight years to live.



Larry Bryant today with his dog, Button

Courtesy of Larry Bryant

“I thought I was going to die, but I didn’t know how to tell anyone,” says Bryant, now 58 and living in New York City. “So I just kept it a secret for the next five years.”

His diagnosis and presumed death sentence took a large toll on him. Bryant dropped out of college, ending his dream of someday making it to the NFL.

“I went from being a freshman all-American with NFL scouts already talking to me to dropping out of school,” he says.

He experienced homelessness and attempted to take his own life several times. But his loved ones still knew nothing.

By 1991, Bryant had reached his breaking point. After being rejected from the Army, he broke down and shared his status with his family.

“This is right after Magic Johnson disclosed his status, and he had to leave basketball,” Bryant says. “That was the first time I saw someone who I could kind of connect with as a heterosexual Black male athlete.”

Of course, before Johnson, there had been tennis legend Arthur Ashe. But he acquired HIV through a blood transfusion.

At the time, people questioned whether Johnson was gay or bisexual despite his denials that he was neither.

“The whole idea of a heterosexual man living with HIV was just not something we talked about or something we acknowledged, and I was one,” Bryant says.

Bryant hadn’t ever considered himself to be at risk for HIV. He wasn’t gay and didn’t use drugs. His main concerns were getting someone pregnant or acquiring some other sexually transmitted infection.

“All these teen movies were about how there was always a guy who had an itch or scratch,” he recalls. “You get a shot, and you’ll be fine, but you’re a man now. So that’s how we talked as young guys or how men talked to teenage guys growing up.”

Conversations about straight men with HIV seemed nonexistent to Bryant. That remained the case as he engaged in HIV advocacy in the mid-’90s and even later.

Indeed, as a straight man living with HIV, Bryant was such a rarity that when he introduced himself as such at a peer group, people called him a unicorn.

That spurred him to appear on the May 2007 cover of POZ and share his story of living with HIV as a straight man.

Andy Feds, a stand-up comedian, emceed that Reunion Project webinar and was also a panelist.

The 31-year-old from Las Vegas calls himself the first-ever openly HIV-positive stand-up comedian born with the virus.

Since 2017, Feds has used comedy to share his story and raise awareness about the virus. Comedy has been like therapy for him, he says, as he navigates his journey with HIV.

Feds had grown up seeing and hearing how negatively people reacted to HIV. As a result, he didn't disclose his status publicly until he was 24.

"I always heard the HIV jokes," Feds says. "Somebody talking about 'Oh, you got HIV' or 'Oh, you got AIDS.' I heard people say HIV is just for gay people. It hurt. I think that's why I didn't date as a teenager."

Feds had always feared that girls would reject him if they knew his status.

"I was like, Are they going to label me these misconceptions that they heard from people that have no idea what they're talking about?" he says.

It was important for Feds to participate in the Reunion Project webinar. For a long time, he didn't encounter many other straight Black men living with HIV.

"It was a lost community," he says. "It's only because of the silence with people just being afraid to talk about it. So it was [nice] being able to see that empowerment of not only straight men but also Black men together."

Feds aims to challenge the societal misconception that HIV affects only gay men by normalizing conversations about HIV for straight men living with the virus via his Keeping It Positive movement.

"That [myth] has been debunked for like 40 years now," Feds says. "However, people aren't getting that education because we don't want to talk about sexual health at all, whether it be to our partners, our doctors, whatever the case."

As part of Keeping It Positive, Feds posts engaging videos on various platforms—sometimes including his girlfriend, who is HIV negative—about living with HIV.

“The concept of being straight with HIV is foreign to people, and I think the reason is stigma,” Fed says.

Bryant agrees that more conversations about straight men with HIV are needed. But they aren’t taking place in the spaces where they should be.

“We need more stats on heterosexual men,” Bryant says, referring to the dearth of studies on straight men with HIV.

If you wanted to know about the few stats that are available, there is no one to ask, Bryant explains. That’s because most providers and health professionals lack knowledge on straight men with HIV.

“There is no go-to person at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Office of National AIDS Policy or on the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS that has an expertise or, dare I say, interest in adding that as a topic or priority,” Bryant says.

Bryant also notes that HIV organizations don’t do their part to foster dialogue about or create programs aimed at the lived experiences of straight men with HIV. Nor do they center HIV prevention for straight men.

“We have the elevation of groups saying that women, particularly women of color, are significantly affected by HIV,” he says. “Yet we haven’t seen any direct messaging to outreach to just men in general regardless of their HIV status.”

As Bryant points out, because HIV is often transmitted through sex, prevention messaging should be targeting straight men too.

“The same environment that existed when I was graduating high school is that community right now,” he says. “We have an opportunity to engage young men in a way that at least lets them know to protect themselves and know they are at risk.”

One way Bryant hopes to reach straight men living with or at risk for HIV is via a special awareness day.

“With all of the awareness days that we have for HIV that you could find on HIV.gov, why not a heterosexual men and HIV awareness day?” Bryant says.

It would give organizations the opportunity to enter the conversation or give communities the opportunity when organizations don’t want to step up.

“When you put up an awareness day, it gives the template and the space to have these events that raise awareness on heterosexual men who are living with HIV,” he says.

“It invites young men and boys to be a part of that conversation, especially as it involves prevention, education and sexuality.”

Until such a day is on the calendar, though, Bryant and other straight men living with HIV are doing their part to nurture community and raise HIV awareness on their own.

Take Derrick Robinson, for example. The 61-year-old from Panama City, Florida, also participated in the Reunion Project webinar. Robinson has a private support group on Facebook for Black straight men with HIV called Straight and Positive; the group meets every Tuesday via Zoom.

Derrick Robinson

Courtesy of Derrick Robinson

“We’re not asking you to show your face or anything,” he says. “But we want you to be empowered and feel some positive energy.”

Robinson, who tested positive for HIV in 1991, turned to social media to look for other straight men with HIV but couldn’t find anyone. When he finally met someone, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and everything shut down. That’s when he created the Facebook group.

"It was four of us," he says. "We met every Tuesday for a whole year, and we made it through the pandemic together."

About five years later, the group has over 90 members from across the United States.

"The conversation now is beyond HIV, because most of us living with HIV are over the age of 50," Robinson says. "We have other comorbidities. We try to hit all the health and social issues that affect Black men, whether you're coming out of prison with a diagnosis or you gotta deal with the virus stigma."

Bryant explains that stigma and fear are largely to blame for why straight men living with HIV, particularly Black men, sometimes don't show up to certain spaces.

He believes straight men need more HIV representation.

"I think heterosexual men who are living with HIV would like to see some prioritization and some real connection with any level of program or interventions," Bryant says. "We want to see ourselves represented in leadership in an organization."

That could be a program director or manager or outreach specialist. And Bryant believes such men don't necessarily need to be living with HIV.

"There are a lot of male-identified leaders and gatekeepers in our communities who aren't living with HIV who can be invited to these spaces to help broaden this conversation," Bryant says.

But he urges HIV organizations to do their part too.

While Bryant acknowledges the strides that the HIV community has made since the beginning of the epidemic, he knows that the work is not yet done.

"We are light years better and beyond where we were as a collective community in 1986, but we still have so much to do, particularly among heterosexual men and our role in the entire conversation," he says.

It's not just about lowering infection rates and prevention, Bryant explains. It's also about men actively owning their role in safer sex, domestic and sexual violence and reproductive rights.

Men shouldn't just be in the room nodding their heads in agreement with their female partners.

"We need to be active leaders in this community so that we are not just forgotten as part of the equation of protecting, assisting and collaborating within all of our communities," Bryant says.

His advice to other Black straight men living with HIV is to step up and show up for the entire Black community. That means Black women, Black youth and Black LGBTQ people.

"We need to be present," he says. "We need to be purposeful. If you're living with HIV, ask for help. Once we break through that whole inability to speak or share, we build trust and connection. The rest will follow."