



Compassion is Key

David “Jax” Kelly has been an HIV activist for decades.

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On a warm autumn day in 2017, in Palm Springs, California, David “Jax” Kelly, JD, MPH, MBA, found himself riding solo as the star on a float—well, actually on top of a jeep—in the Palm Springs Pride Parade, just a week after having been named Mr. Palm Springs Leather.

“I’m this Black man in this white town waving to the crowd,” Kelly says. “I was like Cleavon Little in *Blazing Saddles*, saying, ‘There’s a new sheriff in town!’” Kelly took advantage of this platform to communicate HIV awareness as he traveled worldwide. “I designed my leather vest that had my title on the back of it with a red ribbon that had U=U [Undetectable Equals Untransmittable] written on it,” he says.

Kelly, 60, has been an HIV activist for decades. He lived in New York City in the early days of AIDS. “I was working at a bank at the time,” he says. “There was something of a disconnect between being in that corporate world and finding out what was going on with my gay brothers and sisters. That was when I was HIV negative.” He joined the board of the Upper Room AIDS Ministry, which eventually became the HIV service organization Harlem United. In 1999, Kelly moved to Los Angeles.

Kelly tested HIV positive in 2006. “It was a surprise,” he says, “I thought I was better prepared, but it changed my life.” He rededicated his life to HIV work. In 2014, he moved to Palm Springs, fulfilling a lifelong dream.

These days, Kelly focuses on aging with HIV. “I picked it up as a topic from the get-go. I was diagnosed at 44, so I could see this aging horizon coming along,” he says. Kelly realized that there were very few services geared to people over 50 living with HIV. “I started advocating for HIV service organizations and clients who are aging with HIV,” he says, “and more and more, I talk to people at those organizations, and they will tell you that their client base is largely people who are over 50.”

Since 2019, he has served as the president of the social group Let’s Kick ASS (AIDS Survivor Syndrome) Palm Springs, which he has helped grow into a community-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It serves one of the largest communities of people aging with HIV.

“I think my role is to keep the fight going,” he says. “I know some of my brothers and sisters are

tired. We isolate as we get older, and one of the cures for that isolation is to be active in the community.” He also believes that compassion is key in the HIV community.

“We all need to listen more and be patient when we engage with older people. And let’s find more parallels between HIV and aging,” Kelly adds, “because when we start realizing how much we have in common, then we’ll be able to fight those fights together.”

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