Coping at Home

Longtime HIV advocates share their insights on COVID-19, social justice and living through two pandemics.

August 17, 2020 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Mark S. King, Venita Ray and Charles Sanchez were our guests for the inaugural episode of POZ at Home, which premiered on Monday, June 1. POZ at Home is a series of Zoom events that bring together community members to discuss HIV-related topics. The episode is titled “Coping With COVID-19 and HIV.” As editor-in-chief of POZ, I had the pleasure of hosting the first episode.

King is a blogger, author and activist who has been involved in HIV causes since testing positive in 1985. His award-winning blog, My Fabulous Disease, is crossposted to POZ.com. He was on the June 2013 cover of POZ.

Ray is deputy director of Positive Women's Network–USA. She previously served on the organization's board of directors and has more than 20 years of experience working on social justice issues. She was on the December 2017 cover of POZ.

Sanchez is an HIV-positive writer, performer, director and activist. As a cofounder of Skipping Boyz Productions, he conceived, writes and stars in the musical comedy web series Merce! He was on the October/November 2018 cover of POZ.

Go to poz.com/athome to watch this episode—which includes the world premiere of a parody music video by King and Sanchez of the Barbra Streisand and Donna Summer duet "No More Tears"—as well as additional POZ at Home episodes. Below is an edited and condensed transcript of the first episode.

Gutierrez: Let's start with some basics. Where is everyone? I'm in Jersey City. I've been working from home since March 9, like all the POZ staff.

King: I'm in the woods in Virginia because we have construction going on in our house in Baltimore. I can't wait to get home. I want to be back in Baltimore.

Ray: I'm in Houston. I've been sheltering in place here since early March, with the privilege of working from home.

Sanchez: I'm in Queens, New York. I've been sheltering in place for as long as my hair is in back! [He shows off his hair.]

Gutierrez: How has HIV helped each of you cope with the COVID-19 crisis?

Ray: Coming to grips with my HIV diagnosis was one of the toughest adjustments I've ever made. That perseverance has definitely helped me through this, but it's also kind of bittersweet. What's surfaced around the new coronavirus has been extremely traumatizing. I've been figuring out new ways to cope, but it has not been an easy process.

King: We have some skills as long-term survivors of HIV. We were around during the early days of AIDS when we weren't quite sure how bad it might get, so that feels familiar with COVID-19. Also familiar are the differences between the haves and have-nots. The new coronavirus and the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement have made me think of racism in a way that I hadn't.

Sanchez: Venita and Mark were very thoughtful and eloquent. I've been eating a lot. [Laughter] COVID-19 made me feel scared in a way that I hadn't felt since I was newly diagnosed with HIV. Luckily, like Venita and Mark said, we have an HIV community to help us. It's still frightening, but I'm feeling better.

Gutierrez: What are some of your coping mechanisms? Charles has been eating. I've been taking lots of walks, at least once a day. Venita? Mark?

Ray: I'm also using food as a form of self-care. I'm limiting my news intake. I'm making a decision to be joyful in the moment and help folks where I can.

King: We're cooking more. And I've spent a lot of time escaping into Netflix.

Gutierrez: Racism and violence toward people of color, particularly Black people, are things that both HIV and now COVID-19 have in common. What are your thoughts on that intersection?

Ray: I'm sad, mad, angry, frustrated and scared. To be living with HIV and be Black in the midst of all this anti-Black racism and violence is just so difficult. We need white folks, we need everybody, to rise up. I never show up in HIV spaces where I don't bring my Blackness. We've got to talk more about that.

King: I've had a lot of revelations about my own work. I've always seen myself as doing the gay thing and the HIV thing, and someone else would do the race thing. My skin crawls just saying that. I need some humility to do the work that I need to do to fix what I just laid out.

Sanchez: It's unbelievable that it's still happening in this country. And yet it's really believable. Having conversations with friends who are Black has been helpful. As a Mexican American, I can relate in some ways to their experiences, but in other ways, I'll never be able to.

Gutierrez: Here's a quote from Jesse Milan Jr., CEO of AIDS United: "Ending the HIV epidemic in the United States requires acknowledging, discussing and addressing the deep-seated and pervasive role racism plays in the country's failure to achieve health equity, safety and fairness for all." That's a slam dunk, right, Venita?

Ray: Yes, I read that the day he said it. [Editor's note: Click here to read more about Milan and his advocacy work.]

Gutierrez: We have a couple of questions from the audience: How can we protect our young Black children and families? I'll throw this to you, Venita.

Ray: On Facebook, people are asking, "What can we do?" One person said, We've got to be polite. Well, we are polite. I feel a frustration that the world sees our sons differently. You get tired of hearing the negative data and outcomes when we talk about Black people. How do we protect them? I don't have that answer.

Gutierrez: Well, I don't think you need to carry all that burden—

Ray: All of us need to share that burden. And I have grandsons I want to protect.

Gutierrez: That's what I meant. We all have to share in it, but it's not up to any individual to solve it.

Ray: I don't have an answer for them, but I wish that I did. Keep lifting it up, calling on others to

join us at the ballot box.

Gutierrez: There’s also a question for you, Mark. This person appreciated your vulnerability and transparency to reevaluate your advocacy work in regard to race. How can we get HIV organizations to do so and use their platforms?

King: First of all, we have to get white people at these organizations involved. The #EndingWhiteSilence hashtag has surfaced a lot of great resources. I’m still learning, but that’s been helpful to me.

Gutierrez: As we move on, how do we continue coping? Are there things you’ve learned that you’ll keep doing?

King: We’re in a big crisis. We have to do everything we can to change the leadership of this country.

Sanchez: I’ve been trying to find things that make me happy in some sort of way. I take some online classes with people I know. It reminds me that I’m still active and creative. I’m still a full human being. I’m not just depressed. I’m not just angry. I’m other things too.

Ray: I’ve learned to be a little innovative and creative in this process. I’ve had time to reflect and dig into new stuff. Folks may be opening up from stay-at-home orders, but I’m deciding my own level of opening up to keep myself and others safe.

Gutierrez: This has been amazing. I hope all of you at home found some takeaways. At the very least, I hope you feel comforted. We are with you.

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