



Dancing in the Dark

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May 18, 2026 By [Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.](#)

I was 17 years old when I ventured into the adult world of New York City. It was 1987, so I had missed the earliest days of AIDS. I was not spared from the following years of the epidemic when hope was hard to find.

It was my first year at New York University. I was born in Spanish Harlem and raised in Queens, but my sheltered upbringing didn't prepare me for life in Greenwich Village. The vibe was thrilling, but fear of HIV was everywhere. Seeking solace was a shared experience.

Relief took on many forms. Sex, drugs and alcohol were on the menu, of course, but so was art and music as well as activism. For some, all of the above became their everyday. For me, I took more of a cafeteria approach. After all, I was too young for certain spaces and too closeted for others.

Escaping on the dance floor, however, was a virtually universal pastime that I most definitely participated in. Although I tested HIV positive in 1992, I can honestly say that the joy I found surrounded by my fellow queers in the clubs, bars and elsewhere during those days was lifesaving.

It is this bliss that MPact is tapping into today, particularly for men who have sex with men (MSM). Founded in 2006 as the Global Forum on MSM and HIV, MPact is commemorating its 20th anniversary this year. To mark the occasion, the group has launched a new logo depicting a disco ball, which conveys the joy of being ourselves.

Andrew Spieldenner, PhD, a long-term survivor and an advocate, is MPact's executive director and our cover subject. In addition to his credentials as a researcher, living with HIV gives him an edge when it comes to fulfilling MPact's mission to uplift LGBTQ folks through sex-positive messaging.

[Go here](#) for more about MPact.

In this special Pride issue of POZ, we also explore the work of additional LGBTQ advocates, including Phill Wilson, Marco Benjamin, Cleve Jones and Sean Strub.

As the founder of the Black AIDS Institute (BAI), Phill became a nationally recognized advocate. [Go here](#) to read about his thoughts on the unfinished business of closing the HIV racial gap and his memoir.

When Phill decided to move on from BAI, he had already spent decades in the fight against the virus. A few years ago, Marco faced a similar situation. As a result, Marco stepped away from HIV advocacy but after a while decided to return. [Go here](#) to read about his current efforts as a health activist.

In acknowledgment of HIV as part of a larger health care narrative, Cleve and Sean have joined forces to promote a grassroots campaign. Seven Days in June: Health Is Primary is a national call to elevate health as a governing priority. The goal is to focus attention on how funding cuts as well as policy and regulatory changes will devastate local communities. Folks are encouraged to take action during the first week of June, especially at vigils on June 5, to register their objections to such cuts. [Go here](#) to learn more.

Cuts to the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program could mean thousands of additional HIV cases and declining health for people living with the virus. [Go here](#) to read more about the possible harms such cuts may cause.