How Ex–NBA Commissioner David Stern Helped Educate the World About HIV

Magic Johnson calls the basketball icon a “history maker.” Stern died January 1.

January 3, 2020

Former NBA commissioner David Stern, who helped change mainstream views about HIV in 1991, died January 1, 2020, at age 77.

“Stern’s most humane, poignant act as commissioner came when he stood by Los Angeles Lakers great Magic Johnson when Johnson announced he was HIV positive on Nov. 7, 1991,” wrote NBA reporter Jeff Zillgitt in a USA Today opinion piece (and in a related video below).

In 1991, HIV was deemed a death sentence (lifesaving meds didn’t become available until 1996). Fear and stigma were rampant. Stern not only stood by Johnson but also hired AIDS specialists so that he and the basketball league could become educated. In the process, Stern helped educate the world about HIV basics—such as the fact that HIV cannot be transmitted via sweat.

“Somewhere along the line, we realized that this was an opportunity to educate the world and to calm down the fear that anyone with HIV should be treated like a leper,” Stern is quoted as having said at the time.

David Stern was such a history maker. When I announced in 1991 I had HIV, people thought they could get the virus from shaking my hand. When David allowed me to play in the 1992 All Star Game in Orlando and then play for the Olympic Dream Team, we were

able to change the world.

— Earvin Magic Johnson (@MagicJohnson) January 1, 2020

As a result of Stern's support and educational efforts, fans voted for Johnson, who retired upon his HIV announcement in 1991, to play in the 1992 All-Star Game. He did and was named MVP.

Upon learning of Stern's death, Johnson himself tweeted his praise: "David Stern was such a history maker. When I announced in 1991 I had HIV, people thought they could get the virus from shaking my hand. When David allowed me to play in the 1992 All Star Game in Orlando and then play for the Olympic Dream Team, we were able to change the world."

In related news, see the 2009 POZ blog regarding Magic Johnson and the redundant phrase "HIV virus." And read the news item "How Magic Johnson Told His Wife–and Ex-Lovers—He Had HIV."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/exnba-commissioner-david-stern-helped-educate-world-hiv