Fighting Stigma

With cameras rolling, William Brawner discloses his HIV status.

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Brawner in the film 25 to Life

So you've made a documentary about your life with HIV. Why did you title it 25 to Life?
At the time we started shooting, I was 25 years positive, which was nine years ago. I contracted HIV when I was 18 months old [through a blood transfusion] and found out when I was 5.

You kept this a secret, even during your hard-partying college days. How did you justify, in your mind, not disclosing even to sexual partners?
You ever hear the saying, "If you tell yourself a lie so long you start to believe it"? I was beginning to lie to myself so much that I started to disassociate with being HIV positive. I was so fearful of what was coming up next that I would do anything so people wouldn't believe it was even possible I could be positive.

I always carried the burden of wanting to disclose, but I saw what it did to people like Ryan White and Hydeia Broadbent. I saw people in ACT UP in the '80s and '90s being arrested and people looking at them like they were the most disgusting people on the planet. So I was like, "Hell no, I'm not doing this."

Why'd you change your mind?
Honestly, I started going to church. I was tired of being quiet, of not being my true self. It cost me more to keep it hidden than to let it go.

Have you disclosed to all of your former girlfriends?
I've made an attempt. Some simply don't want to talk to me. To this day, I've never infected anyone. But even in my promiscuity, I was protected 90 percent of the time with condoms. But that's only one of the story lines—the film is also about fear, stigma, redemption, isolation, relationships, medical adherence and side effects.

What's been the reaction to the film?
Some people appreciate it, some don't. That's fine. It's hard for people to grasp what stigma and discrimination have done to us. But it's my reality—the good, the bad and the ugly. And there's still a happy ending. I have two beautiful children, and I'm the executive director of the Haven Youth Center [in Philadelphia]. We took over a camp for HIV-positive kids, Camp Bright Feathers, which I went to as a child. It's like a dream come true. God is good.

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