First Person Cured of HIV, Who Died Last Year, Is Memorialized [VIDEO]

Timothy Ray Brown, aka “the Berlin Patient,” went public about his HIV cure in 2011, becoming a beacon of hope.

May 12, 2021 By Trent Straube

Once known as “the Berlin Patient” to protect his anonymity, Timothy Ray Brown was the first person to be cured of HIV. He died last September of leukemia at age 54. Friends, advocates and his husband, Tim Hoeffgen, gathered Friday, May 7, in Palm Springs, California, to pay tribute to his legacy and dedicate a memorial bench and plaque in his honor.

The memorial bench is located in the 5.5-acre Desert Healthcare Wellness Park near Desert Regional Medical Center.

Brown “was an inspiration for so many to seek treatment and to know that there was hope in science and there was a light at the end of the tunnel,” Conrado Bárzaga, MD, the CEO of Desert Healthcare District and Foundation, told NBC Palm Springs at the dedication. (You can watch the NBC segment above.) Bárzaga added that Brown and his story helped people belief that cure research would eventually “allow us to come back to a normal life as we knew it before the AIDS pandemic.”

“He was like a medical marvel,” Hoeffgen said. “He brought a lot of hope to people living with HIV, and he was well known here in Palm Springs and nationally and internationally. He went out and spoke everywhere across the country, and he was just a very kind and gentle soul.”

Timothy Ray Brown on the June 2011 cover of POZ

Brown wasn't always so public about his situation. When researchers first reported his case in 2008, he was referred to as the Berlin Patient. He decided to go public in June 2011 and was known as an HIV advocate across the world before he died of leukemia.

It was an earlier case of leukemia that led to his HIV cure. Brown was living in Berlin when he was diagnosed with HIV in 1995 as well as when he learned he had acute myeloid leukemia in 2006. As POZ explained in a September obituary on Brown:

> His hematologist, Gero Hütter, MD, then at the University of Berlin's Charité Hospital, had the idea to use stem cells from a donor with a rare genetic mutation known as CCR5-delta32 that blocks HIV from entering cells.
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> Brown underwent intensive chemotherapy and radiation to kill off his cancerous immune cells. He nearly died in the process and was left with lasting complications. But the donor stem cells rebuilt a new immune system that was resistant to the virus.
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> After the bone marrow transplants led to sustained HIV remission, Brown's case was described in a poster at the 2008 Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections (CROI) and written up in medical journals but received little attention outside the field.
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> Brown moved back to the United States in 2010, and in June 2011, he went public with his identity as the Berlin Patient in a POZ cover story.
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> Brown became a willing guinea pig, undergoing extensive testing to help researchers learn more about how he beat HIV—a question still not fully answered. Scientists searched for residual virus in his blood, gut tissue and everywhere else in his body they could manage to look, but they were unable to detect replication-competent HIV anywhere. At the time of his death, he had been living free of HIV for 13 years.

"I wanted to do what I could to make [a cure] possible," Brown had said. "I get…peace of mind knowing what I can to help bring about a cure for HIV. I'm very much hoping that curing HIV can be done in a much easier way, in a way that's not hard on the body."

To view a series of social media posts expressing appreciation of Brown's advocacy, check out the POZ November Spotlight. And in related news, see "Remembering 18 HIV Leaders We Lost in 2020 [Slideshow]."

To learn more about the current state of HIV cure research, click #Cure. You'll find a collection of POZ articles, including an article about Adam Castillejo ("the London Patient") who is considered the second person cured of HIV; similar to Brown, his cure resulted from a stem cell transplant resulting from a cancer diagnosis.

Loreen Willenberg on the March 2021 cover of POZ

And don’t miss our March 2021 cover story, “An Exception to the Rule,” which profiles elite controller Loreen Willenberg, pictured above, who may be the first person to be cured of HIV without a bone marrow transplant.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/first-person-cured-hiv-died-last-year-memorialized-video