Go Fish

Bermeo, famous for tuna and HIV

January 1, 1998 By Rachel Sarah

An HIV positive fisherman isn't the image one recalls from Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, but that's what José Unanue is.

"We've depended on the sea all of our lives," say Unanue, 39. Following in the footsteps of generations of fishermen, Unanue boarded his first boat at 18. Based in Bermeo, his hometown on the edge of the mountains in northern Spain's Basque country, Unanue sailed the seas for six months a year, catching the tuna we buy canned in our local markets. And like Hemingway's old man, Unanue met exotic women and dreamed about catching the big one.

Fish, that is, not AIDS. But12 years ago, Unanue was diagnosed with HIV, and told that he had two years to live. With a population of 18,000, Bermeo has the highest HIV rate per capita in Europe today – 164 residents have died of AIDS. Most fishermen contracted the virus through shared needles, and passed it on to their partners at home. "Men also had sexual relationships at port, and there were no condoms at port when I was at sea," says Unanue.

Unanue has since given up the sea to teach at a technical high school for adults. It's less rugged than life in the salt spray, but he still faces challenges: When administrators found out that Unanue was positive, they threatened to fire him, even though AIDS had already claimed 20 of the students. Unanue fought back, and today he not only teaches but serves as a confidante to students.

This summer, Unanue's medical exam reported a CD4 count of 740 and an undetectable viral load. "I'm not taking any medication and I've never opted to do so," he says.

Bermeo may be a tiny town in a Catholic country, but every summer, thousands of Spaniards drive north to attend a weeklong national AIDS conference hosted by tx0-Hiesa, an organization founded by Unanue. "Bermeo is a solidarity town," Unanue says, proudly wearing a red ribbon. "Not many people in Spain wear the red ribbon, but every time we plan something with respect to AIDS in Bermeo, everyone wears one."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/jose-unanue-12740-1192