Justin Toro

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Bronx, New York
Positive since 2006

I am 28 years old of Hispanic decent and am currently living in the Bronx. NY. I have been living with HIV since May 20, 2006. Finding out that I was diagnosed with HIV changed my life forever, but not in the bad way that people would think. Instead, I felt that I was given another view of the world and I wasn't going to take it for granted this time.

In 2006, I was living away from home at college and enjoying life. I was in a committed relationship for about two years and was under the impression that we were in a monogamous relationship.

After my 20th birthday, I received a call from a partner notification line telling me, "Someone you came in contact with tested positive for HIV, and you should go get tested." The automated voice sound as though I was speaking to Mr. Moviefone. It was insensitive and cold. However, this did not stop me from going to get tested.

The first two times I was tested, I got a negative result so I thought I was in the clear. However, being such a worrywart, I took a third test to ensure that the other tests were correct. That third test came back positive.

When you hear the words, "I am sorry, but your result came back HIV positive," is like learning that your best friend has died—or even worse—you have lost the love of your life. In a way, I felt like I was mourning a loss. The loss of my HIV negative status and the life I had known for the past 20 years.

After hearing those words, I went through every single human emotion possible within a 10-minute time frame. I was mad, sad, angry, hurt, lost and confused. I swear the nurse thought I was having a mental breakdown. Soon, however, I pulled myself together and said "OK, what's next?

Within six months of finding out about my status, I found a doctor and began my journey with him (and my social worker) to ensure I would live a happy and healthy life. At the time of receiving my diagnosis, I thought I had my life planned out. From the type of career I wanted to have and the type of relationships I would have. However hearing the news I was HIV positive, made me think. "Is everything going to change?" That answer would be yes!

My life has changed since I found out about my status but in a way I could never have dreamed of. I began learning as much about the virus as I could, and soon found myself passing along the information to my friends and peers. This led me to wanting to work with other young people who were living with HIV as well as educating those who were HIV negative on how to remain negative.

Seven years later, I am at an agency that I love, doing the work I feel I was born to do. I travel to places I never thought I would go to, telling my story and sharing my message and feeling so fulfilled with life. Meeting different people from around the world and partnering with agencies like the CDC to do the "Let's Stop HIV Together" campaign has been a highlight of the past seven years. Even though I have HIV. HIV does not have me!

Here's my message to anyone reading this: Although we have come so far with the advancement of HIV treatment and prevention, HIV is not something that I would wish upon anyone. My experience has gotten me this far because instead of sitting back and letting HIV control me, I chose to control my HIV and with that control came power. That power has made me into the man I am today and has allowed me the opportunities I have been given.

If you are HIV positive, work with your doctors and/or other providers to ensure you get the best life you deserve to live. If you are HIV negative, remember that my experience may not be the same experience as everyone else out there. HIV is unique and complex and the same can be said about an individual's experience living and surviving the virus. I thank everyone for the hard work that is being done to help end this epidemic and I send my love to all my brothers and sisters who are overcoming this virus!

What three adjectives best describe you?
Loving, loyal and passionate

What is your greatest achievement?
My greatest achievement is recently completing my graduate program and receiving my Masters of Social Work from Hunter College in NYC.

What is your greatest regret?
My greatest regret is not looking at the world and my life with the lens that I am currently using. Now I feel I value every moment I am given here on this earth and wish that everyone did too.

What keeps you up at night?
Thoughts about how I plan on making the best of the next day that is to come

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?
The only thing I would change about living with HIV is the feeling of being "unclean" or "undesirable" after learning one's status.

What is the best advice you ever received?
The best advice I have ever received came from a song quote of Beyoncé, which tells us to live

each day until our last and to know that when we leave this world, we meant something in somebody’s life.

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?
I would have to say that I most admire the resiliency of the HIV/AIDS community. Living with a chronic illness is not easy, but the stigma that is attached to HIV is just as hard to deal with.

What drives you to do what you do?
My driving factor is the passion to work with young people. Young people are often seen as a difficult population to work with, however, they are the most amazing!

What is your motto?
“We must accept finite disappointment. but we must never lose infinite hope.” –Martin Luther King Jr.

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?
A picture of me and my family. Others materials are easily replaced, however memories are not so replaceable.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?
I would want to be a dog owned by a celebrity. Reason being, I would be taken around the world and given the same love/attention and spotlight as my owner!

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