Keep It Together

David and Johnny are committed to each other—and to overcoming any challenge to their union.

January 7, 2019 By Trent Straube

Relationships are hard work. But when you're a gay Black couple in the South—both of you sons of Baptist ministers, no less—and you're both very public on social media, and you're also developing your own brand while planning your upcoming wedding, and one of you is living with HIV, well, let's just say the challenges can get a bit extra.

But none of the pressure has been enough to undo David Massey, 39, and Johnny Lester, 31, aka "David & Johnny," content creators, event planners, bloggers (including for POZ and Real Health), businessmen, HIV advocates and soon-to-be husbands. They're also a serodiscordant couple, meaning that one has HIV (David) and the other doesn't (Johnny). Based in Atlanta, the duo spoke with POZ about their HIV and relationship journeys and what lies ahead in 2019. The interview has been edited and condensed.

Congratulations on the engagement! Tell us all about the proposal.

David: Did I get down on my knee? [Laughs] No. We were at an HIV function, and I had facilitated a workshop about happy relationships and serodiscordant couples. We were at lunch, sitting down at a table with [actress] Sheryl Lee Ralph, and Johnny looks over at me and says, "I know what I want." I'm thinking—to know Johnny you have to know that Johnny is always, always thinking about food—and I thought he meant he knows what he wants for dinner because that is always a huge conversation in our household every single day. I thought he got a jump on it that day. I said, "What's that?" And he says, "You." I said, "Oh, you already got me." He says, "I mean, I don't want to just be your boyfriend or just be your plus one. I want to be your husband. That's something that I want, and I'm gonna get it." I looked back at him and said, "OK!"

Johnny: Actually, we set a date to be married in 2016 and announced on social media we were engaged. But then we had a moment that challenged our relationship. An infidelity issue came up, and we were blindsided by dealing with it. We decided to take a break from social media for—how long was that, baby?

David: About six months.

Johnny: Right. One of our big themes is, we say we are committed to destroying the things that try to take us out. So we were like, “We can’t just throw everything away at the first thing that tries to take us out.” We got into therapy and worked through individual and collective issues. I learned things about me that I had brought from my childhood into the relationship that I had not dealt with.

And you divulge these personal details in your HIV advocacy and dating workshops?

David: Absolutely. We want to be relevant and relatable, and not just to people with HIV or the LGBT community. Our message is broader.

Johnny: There’s this concept—maybe it’s the culture in the South or in the African-American community—that what goes on in our house stays in our house. And I just don’t believe in that. The first time we opened our mouths about infidelity was [last year] at an event for MSM [men who have sex with men]. Their jaws just dropped. Social media can be a bad representation of the truth—anyone can look great on social media—so no one knew that truth. But the guys really opened up to us and said, “If you two went through that and you’re able to be here today, then I need to reconsider what I’m doing.” I think the first time people are in relationship trouble, they’re often like, “I’m out. I’m not doing this any more.”

David: We challenge people on how they view relationships. There is a person out there for you, but are you sabotaging yourself—whether it’s your view of HIV or something else? How do you enter into a relationship if you don’t even know the definition of what makes you happy in a relationship or how to show up for a relationship? [Editor’s note: See “The Love Series” sidebar at the end of this article for their relationship advice and information on their dating mixers.]

As a gay Black serodiscordant couple, you must face all sorts of pressure.

Johnny: For us, there’s a different twist. You’ve got one sector of the population that says you can’t be gay because you’re going to go to hell. But here in Atlanta, there are a lot of affirming ministries and openly gay ministers. They hold us accountable, like: “We understand that you’re gay, but as long as you’re living together and not married, then you’re shacking up.” It’s as if you can’t be gay, but if you are gay, then you have to be doing it the right way. Sometimes, I think the pressure you face comes from trying to find your own, I guess you could call it, identity.

You both have fathers who are Baptist ministers. David, your family is from Chicago, and Johnny, yours is from Tennessee. How have your families dealt with the topics of HIV and gay marriage?

Johnny: When David and I got together, I had not come out to my family yet. I have family members who are supportive and love us, but my parents haven’t been able to come to grips with the whole my being gay thing. Hopefully, they’ll catch up. But I can’t put my life on pause till they’re comfortable. One thing I learned in therapy is I have to be OK even if they don’t catch up.

David: I waited three years after my diagnosis to disclose to them. My mom was very quiet, my older sister hyperventilated, my other sisters cried. My dad was very quiet. My being his only son

shook the very core of his foundation. But I reassured everyone I was in great health and staying undetectable. My family has made great strides. My dad still struggles with [the marriage]. I told him, “I’ll love you if you attend the wedding, and if you choose not to, I will still love you. Our interactions may be a little different because now I’ll have a husband to consider, and if my life ends before his, you all have to go through him for information and you have to be comfortable with that. But if you need to talk I’m here.” He said that did something for him because he thought if he chose not to [attend the wedding] our relationship would change. So do I expect him to attend? I absolutely do. Will he be comfortable? Well, I’m not getting married to make him comfortable. It is my life. And never once has my family been disrespectful to Johnny. They love Johnny. We even go on vacations and have holidays together. And they know Johnny is HIV negative, and I think they look at him and think, “Thank you for making sure that [David’s] on top of his health and taking his medications.” The one thing they can all agree on is that they want to see us happy. Now, do they all agree with the fact that we’re getting married? Absolutely not. Because of their religious beliefs. But we’re doing the work of changing the paradigm of what people believe is socially acceptable and even spiritually acceptable in the LGBT [people] of color community.

Johnny: Unfortunately, in our culture, Black, gay and HIV automatically get grouped into poverty—it’s a socioeconomic status issue. We’re determined to change that perspective. I don’t want people to see us as damsels in distress. I think not enough storylines are going on in the LGBT [people] of color with HIV community. We’re always reduced to being flamboyant—and I’m over-the-top too, and I love my designers and nice things—but I was at an event with David, and they were having a twerking contest, and I was like, “Why are we twerking?” I don’t mind twerking; it has its place. But where are the gay Black businessmen and CEOs? David has done so many amazing things—We met the pope together! Case closed. Drop the mike!—but those types of stories don’t get shared enough. But if you twerk or vogue, you get all the attention. We have to change that narrative.

How did you guys meet the pope?

David: I have a friend, Cheryl Porter, who [is originally from Chicago] but has been a singer in Italy for over 20 years. The Vatican called her management [about doing a holiday music special]. She called me and said, “Do you think you can come over and sing with me for Pope Francis.” I said, “Um…yes!” She said, “Does Johnny sing?” I said, “He doesn’t like to, but I’ll make sure he does,” so he [was invited too]. It was amazing. People were there from all over. We spoke different languages and dialects, but when we got onstage in the rehearsal hall, it all came together. Music really is a universal language.

David Massey and Johnny LesterStephanie Eley

Under your “David & Johnny” brand, you founded Hiclass Management. Tell us about that.

Johnny: It’s a boutique event company we developed. One facet is we do over-the-top parties and events, like an MTV Cribs–style birthday party or wedding. Another facet is awareness events and marketing. David travels speaking at different conferences, and our three-city relationship tour, “Cocktails & Conversations,” was financed under Hiclass Management. What I love about the David & Johnny brand is that we love each other. We’re not two guys doing this for the looks of it. I can say that honestly, this is my friend and the person I truly love.

In addition to all of this, there’s Hiclass Blends, your loose-leaf tea company, and you each have your own full-time job. What are your day jobs?

David: I work in the public health sector.

Johnny: I work in marketing and branding. I comanage a mental health firm and work with a clinical psychologist, Dr. Sherry [Blake]. She had been a clinical psychologist for over 30 years, and in 2011, she got a call from Grammy Award winner Toni Braxton to be part of her reality show, The Braxton Family Values, and I built her platform from there. We’ve done The Real Housewives of Atlanta, Love & Hip Hop, Little Women [the reality series that stars a group of, well, little women]. I have other clients as well.

Aside from the wedding, what else is coming up in 2019?

Johnny: Our big thing is, we want to do a relationship talk tour. And we want experts to come out and help us educate. We want to speak from our experience but also give professional opinions too. Fingers crossed.

David: People who usually ask us about the wedding ask, “Have you bought a home, and have you thought about children?”

And?

David: As far as children go, we have not agreed on anything. [Laughs]

Johnny: We haven’t agreed on how the children are going to come about. We have two different concepts.

That brings us back to the wedding. How are you envisioning the big day?

Johnny: David and I have been together almost six years. When you get older, you get wiser and your focus changes. We could do something over-the-top, but for me, I think about the issues I’ve had with my family and certain people, and I feel like I want something that celebrates my love for David but is meaningful to the community. The plans are still in the works. Just know that whatever it is, it’s going to be high class.

David: Our foundation is built on advocacy. We believe our union is a testament to discordant couples and their infinite possibilities.

A panel discussion on the CDC campaignCourtesy of David and Johnny

Stopping HIV Stigma Together

With help from Instagram posts and the CDC!

Last year, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) relaunched its stigma-busting 2012 campaign titled “Let’s Stop HIV Together.” The posters, ads and videos star a new roster of people who are living with and thriving with HIV—including David and Johnny, an Atlanta-based serodiscordant couple (David has HIV; Johnny does not). To promote the campaign, the duo hosted a viewing party and panel discussion at the Georgia Institute of Technology. “The campaign,” Johnny says, “is one of the best things we’ve ever done.”

Stigma refers to the negative attitudes and beliefs about HIV that can keep people from getting tested, taking meds and enjoying their best possible lives. David knows firsthand its damaging effects. When he was younger, he witnessed his family serve food on a separate set of dishes to a relative who had HIV. Years later, when he tested positive for the virus, he vowed that no one would know his status.

Lucky for everyone, he changed his mind. “I realized that if stigma was going to be broken, it had to start with me,” David told POZ. “I had to reveal some things about myself that I previously said I

wouldn’t to my family, friends and coworkers. When I did, it was the most liberating thing I could have ever done.” But, he adds, “I’m just one side of the equation; my partner has to live with this too.”

Johnny has no qualms about using their public platforms, including personal Instagram feeds and other social media, to fight HIV stigma. “I want everyone to know that I already know [about David’s status] and that I’m comfortable with it,” he says. “I want people to know that life is more than a pill for a person who is HIV positive. They need to see David like a rock star. I want people to know that David and Johnny are fine. They’re living their best lives!”

The CDC CampaignCourtesy of CDC

“The Love Series”

David & Johnny’s 3 Cs to a successful relationship

As “relationship influencers,” David and Johnny take their brand and know-how on the road through a series of mixers and workshops. A few examples from last year: “The Dating Game: How to Get and Keep a Man in 2018,” held in partnership with AID Atlanta and specifically for Black men who have sex with men, and “The Love Series: Cocktails & Conversations,” a dating and relationship Q&A mixer held in Nashville. “The great thing about Nashville,” Johnny recalls, “is that we had gay, straight, bi, male, female, everything. Relationships are versatile, and we go over fundamental things.”

“And for people living with HIV or at risk for HIV,” continues David, “the message is that serodiscordant couples exist and that it is possible.” He’s referring to couples like him and Johnny, in which one person is living with HIV (in this case, David) and the other is negative. “I want the community to know that you can find love no matter what your status is,” David says. “You are valuable enough to be loved.”

“One thing we get asked in our workshops is, ‘How do you all keep it together?’” Johnny says. “We like to introduce people to David & Johnny’s 3 Cs of relationships: Consistent Communication will keep you Connected.”

“We get that life happens and it’s busy for most of us,” David adds. “However, we believe uninterrupted face-to-face communication is the glue that holds healthy relationships together. The conversations should be about all things and should occur consistently. It’s not about agreeing on everything but about maintaining a strong bond with or connection to your partner that will keep the love alive even in the tough times when you might not see eye to eye.”

Atendees at the “Cocktails & Conversations” dating and relationship Q&A mixer in NashvilleCourtesy of David and Johnny

“How to Get and Keep a Man” in AtlantaCourtesy of David and Johnny

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