True Life: Dating With HIV

Born with HIV, Lexi Gibson keeps it real on MTV.

February 24, 2016 By Shawn Decker

On July 4, 1991, Lexi Gibson contracted HIV at birth. When she was 5, her mother passed away, just as effective treatments for the virus were beginning to emerge.

Now healthy and happy, Lexi, 24, is a beneficiary of these advances and has enjoyed an undetectable viral load for close to a decade.

As a young adult living in Las Vegas, she has made it her mission to shed some light on what life and love with HIV is really like.

On your birthday, do you secretly pretend that all of the fireworks are being shot off in your honor?

Growing up, my father—along with everyone else in my life—always told me the fireworks were for me. So, yes, I enjoy them as if they were just for me. I am definitely grateful to have such a celebratory day as my birthday.

You were just featured on the MTV documentary series True Life in an episode entitled "I'm Dating With HIV." What was that like?

I am very grateful for the opportunity to be on True Life. My goal was to show the world that dating with HIV is 100 percent possible.

We were told by the producers, "Your story is great because it shows that someone can and will accept you for your status."

The show was supposed to be my true life. It wasn't. I am hurt, I feel betrayed and I am disappointed with how MTV twisted my story and relationship.

In what ways were things twisted?

Just to clear things up, [my boyfriend] Max's health was not at risk and we did not struggle with HIV as an issue in our relationship. Ever. MTV made it look that way.

I have not experienced, “Telling guys my status and never hearing from them again.” I said, “Guys will pretend they like you, sleep with you, then you never hear from them again.”

Amazing what editing can do. I have never struggled with people not wanting to date me or sleep with me. I do not feel like dating with HIV is hard.

You and Max were very open about your relationship with the film crew. Did filming put any stress on either of you?

Filming did not put any stress on us; we just went with it. Max and I did not break up over my status or an infection. These are the things MTV conveyed to the viewers and they are not true.

The filming of our breakup was a month later. Max and I were struggling with normal relationship issues. At the end of the episode I was crying in the kitchen asking, “How could you just leave?” What’s funny is I was saying that about myself.

I felt guilty for ending it because we love each other so much and I broke a commitment we had made to be together. At that time, I was overwhelmed with the struggles in our relationship so I felt breaking it off was necessary.

We got back together and, aside from the twist in our story, I am so glad HIV was brought to light. The more we talk about it, the safer everyone can be in all areas. [Editor’s Note: After this Q&A was conducted, Lexi and Max separated again.]

I am happy to say that many people have reached out to me for guidance and support since the show. They have also thanked me for opening their eyes to something they knew nothing about, that people with HIV are just like them: people with a medical condition. This was my goal.

As someone who was born with HIV, how did you approach dating and disclosure at an early age?

When I was younger, I struggled a bit with disclosure. I started dating when I was 14. I always disclosed within the first few days and before going further than kissing. My struggle was the fear of their reaction and, possibly, rejection. I was scared they might not want to date me, they would freak out

Over the years, after trying many different ways of disclosing, I have found that the best way is without preparation, come out with the truth and immediately educate them. I stay calm, shut my fears down and communicate that I know my worth.

The newly diagnosed have a tough time figuring out the right time to have the HIV talk. What’s your advice on how to deal with someone who doesn’t react well to a positive person’s disclosure of their HIV status?

My advice would be to stay calm. Try to understand where they are coming from. Put your feelings aside for a minute, even though it hurts. Understanding their side and giving them time to process is important. It is OK if they need time.

Most people have heard nothing but lies and horror stories about HIV and AIDS. So we must allow them time to ingest the new information we are giving them. If they do not decide to be involved with you, hold your head high and know someone will love you, understand you and accept you just the way you are.

Not everyone we meet or go on a date with is the one or meant to be with us. Be open, educate yourself and remember that you cannot control anyone but yourself.

Congratulations on the launch of your YouTube channel. What message do you hope to convey to young people living with HIV?

Thank you! With my YouTube channel, I hope to educate everyone about HIV and mental health, inspire people to live, love and be open and understanding regardless of your status, and defy HIV's stereotypes.

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