



What Made Me Survive?

Tim B. asks the question many other long-term survivors have asked.

January 8, 2024 By Tim B.

It has been a little over 40 years since the first cases of HIV were reported. Back then, it didn't have a name. I was diagnosed with HIV in 1995, and I really can't believe that I am still alive today.

It was the summer of '95. New York City was very hot, and it was a few months after my boyfriend had passed away from AIDS that I went for a test at a local clinic. I assumed that I was fine because I had never had any HIV-related illnesses, nor did I have any of the purple spots (Kaposi sarcoma) on my body that my boyfriend had. I needed to take an HIV test to ease my mind, to give me comfort, but it didn't. The test result came back positive.

My boyfriend (Carlos) and I had always practiced safe sex. He was diagnosed in 1993, but it was 1994 that was his (and my) hardest year. He got sicker and sicker throughout the year. Carlos's illnesses started with Kaposi sarcoma, then his energy levels went way down and then he was hospitalized numerous times for various illnesses.

I couldn't even begin to count the exact number of days he was in the hospital.

I spent New Year's Eve 1994 by his bedside in the hospital, which was conveniently around the corner from our apartment in NYC's Greenwich Village. Carlos would be dead three months later, dying on Academy Awards night in March 1995. It was the night that *Forrest Gump* won Best Picture, a movie about a man with longevity, which was ironic because my boyfriend didn't have any. Carlos was only 30 when he passed away, surrounded by me, a couple of friends and his home nurse.

When I got my diagnosis, I was in a state of shock. My body felt so heavy. Some days I just couldn't move. I struggled to go to work and struggled even more to maintain contact with friends. It was even worse when I found out my CD4 count and viral load.

My CD4 count was in the double digits, and my viral load was very high. If being diagnosed with HIV shocked me, knowing that my numbers were so low and so bad was even worse. I asked my doctor how much time I had left. With my numbers that bad and the lack of effective HIV medications at that time, I figured I would be dead in a year. But by some miracle, cocktail

combination therapy became available. I have continued to take various combinations of drugs since then. Sure, I've had a few health scares—in 1999, I had a fever for two months, and no one could figure out what it was until, luckily, it quietly went away—but for the past 26 years, my health has been robust and HIV-illness free.

What made me survive HIV? The cocktail combination of HIV drugs have had something to do with it. But I also think that I want to continue living for Carlos and for all those friends (and two of my cousins) I lost in the 1980s and 1990s to the once deadly disease. HIV has not taken me, and I won't let it.

What three adjectives describe you?

Determined, positive, full of life.

What is your greatest regret?

Not being able to spend more time with those people who succumbed to HIV at such a young age.

What is the best advice you ever received?

Live everyday like it is your last.

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