Making It Matter

After surviving AIDS, Michael Aksten is committed to action against HIV.

August 17, 2026 By Michael Aksten

I was diagnosed with HIV in 2009. Shortly after, my condition progressed rapidly to AIDS, with a CD4 count of 10. I was told in no uncertain terms that I would not live to see much of a future. What followed was a decade-long fight for survival.

There were periods when every step forward was uncertain and when simply staying alive required more than I thought I had to give. I came dangerously close to death more than once. While I am no longer in immediate danger, I have never fully recovered. The impact of that time remains with me physically, mentally and emotionally.

But survival has a way of reshaping perspective. What started as a fight to stay alive became a realization that if I was still here, there had to be a reason. That second chance came with a responsibility, not just to live but to do something with my life.

Today, I serve on the board of directors of one of the largest nonprofits in southern New Hampshire, where I also serve as the cochair of a federally qualified health center oversight committee and as a member of the strategic planning committee. I hold a seat within New Hampshire's HIV Planning Group and am also engaged nationally in Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program–aligned initiatives and advocacy networks.

My focus has been to take lived experience and translate it into meaningful improvements in care, access and policy.

I'm also a certified PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis] navigator through HealthHIV and have pursued education and training to better understand and navigate the systems that so many people depend on.

We have made incredible progress in HIV care. Treatment has advanced. Outcomes have

improved. U=U [Undetectable Equals Untransmittable] has reshaped what is possible. But there are still gaps in access, in awareness and in the lived realities of those navigating these systems. There are still people who are diagnosed too late, who fall out of care or who never find their way into it at all.

My story is one of survival, but it is also a reflection of how close the system came to failing me and how often it still fails others. That is why I continue this work.

Behind every statistic is a person. Behind every delay in care is a consequence. And behind every success is a responsibility to ensure that no one else has to fight as hard just to survive.

I was not supposed to make it. But I did. And I intend to make it matter.

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