Manny Ramos

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Phoenix, Arizona
Positive since 2008

I became positive in 2008. I had health insurance, a stable work and home, and I had recently relocated to Arizona from Virginia. After a routine blood check on Valentine's Day, my doctor broke the news. Afterward, I went back to work. My doctor's advice was, "Do not disclose at work. People living with HIV can live a normal life."

I was nothing from normal. I was new to the area, with no friends and a high sex drive that quickly disappeared. Before all this, I loved to drink after work, clean the pool, do house chores, walk my dog, and if I was in the mood then maybe I'd have a meaningless sexual encounter. After all, being single in a new town had its rewards.

That Valentine's night was different. I had to change my habits and clean up my act. No more screwing around, and it was time to get serious about future life contributions. If I was going to die, I wanted to leave my mark.

I quit smoking and drinking cold turkey. I stopped drinking coffee, drank more water, and started taking vitamins and eating a healthy diet.

In my head I kept thinking, "I can fix this and beat the stigma." I was in denial but as time passed, the cleaning of my system help me see things clearly.

I started taking Atripla, which led to some groggy mornings, but otherwise, I was doing well. I received high work evaluations and my concentration to succeed was more clear than ever. Performance by example was my daily motto.

Next thing I had to deal with was my family. It had been too long, and I decide it was time to storm back into their life, because I wanted to make sure the right-wing extremist side of my family woke up to reality. I was successful and felt comfortable standing up to them. I was sure I could hold my ground. It proved to be a test. But I am an equal with no less education, and I made it all on my own. I never asked for a penny or took anything.

At the dinnertable, my sister said, "I don't accept you, but you are my brother."

I replied, “It’s OK, because you are a Republican, and I accept your ignorance.”

She answered, “The Republican party is a Christian party with family values.” Hiding her hate behind Christian values is something she does well. This will not change, but I don’t let it affect me. I make sure I am there for every family get-together. I just have to be me. So far, it seems to be working and the walls are breaking down.

My past lovers were wonderful guys and I am still friends with all of them. I remain in contact, and they all know about my status. They are not positive, but time has not been gentle with them.

My doctor is Ken Fisher, an HIV specialist. I am lucky to live a mile away from his office and two miles away from his house. I follow his rules about healthy habits. I changed my meds and now feel like a totally normal person. I look better now than I did when I was negative. I love my doctor—he is the best. I am undetectable and have been for six years.

I know I am awesome in bed, but I have not been able to let loose until recently. I went five years without sex. I am slowly starting to open up to dating. I get approached by all the wrong young, negative guys. I am starting to make trips to Palm Springs, and I feel relaxed in that community. There is good support there as well as good-looking HIV-positive men.

I have added a beautiful guest house to my property. Someday my family will visit me and I will be ready to show them that I am just as normal as they are.

What three adjectives best describe you?
Direct, charming, and a good politician

What is your greatest achievement?
Consecutive employee of the year awards in a company of 70,000+ employees

What is your greatest regret?
My first breakup. It took a piece of me that I have not been able to get back. The first love, the tingles, the touch of a love one.

What keeps you up at night?
Things I have to address with family, home and work

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?
A cure. I wish HIV was like the flu or sore throat. Something that goes away.

What is the best advice you ever received?
My doctor said, “People with HIV can live normal lives, have mortgages, kids, and be community leaders."

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?

Dr. Ken Fisher. He has helped me grow. He has done many things for our community. He is my idol.

What drives you to do what you do?
I want to be a good example of a gay male. Honest, open, direct and respectful to others and myself.

What is your motto?
Performance by example. I have the freedom to do what I want at work. I choose to be an example of good values and to do the right thing.

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?
My dog, a 180-pound Neopolitan mastiff named Buck. He’s a good snuggler and stubborn just like a man.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?
A human. We have the ability to dream, create, think, feel, express and procreate. We have emotions that can move mountains.

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