



Memories of a Long-Term Survivor

Christopher Reilly found healing from childhood sexual abuse through sharing his experience.

March 30, 2026 By Christopher Reilly

Over 30 years have passed since I was diagnosed with AIDS. In 1991, I was shocked to learn via an article in Newsday that my former dentist, whom I had dated in the 1980s, had passed away from AIDS-related Pneumocystis pneumonia and his patients were getting tested for HIV. I went to get tested as soon as possible, and the test came back positive. For me, the news was catastrophic. I was only 26 years old.

The beginning of the AIDS epidemic was a really scary time in history. There was confusion, panic and much misinformation regarding transmission and treatment of HIV. Many people were living in fear and worried about when they would become sick. I had to keep my diagnosis a secret. It was sheer agony not to be able to tell anyone about my condition. AIDS was known as the “silent battle,” and it truly was.

When I was younger, I was bullied for being gay. From early childhood into adolescence, I was abused—sexually, physically and mentally—by a family friend. As a young adult, I struggled with hate, bigotry and stigma.

I came out as gay when I was in my early teens. I disclosed my sexuality to my family, minister and some trusted friends. I also shared the truth about my sexual abuse and rape. I had suppressed the trauma and abuse for so long.

Having the courage to tell my story was a double-edged sword. For my family, it was extremely painful to watch friends and other family members walk away from us. It was like I had done something unspeakably wrong. Yet it was something I could not control or even fully understand. My immediate family stood by me and loved me no matter what.

Survival is universal—that’s what we’re all here for. We need not experience our feelings in isolation. We can reach out to others for support. We no longer need to pretend to be something we’re not solely because other people may feel threatened.

Self-acceptance leads to change and growth. We do not have to prove ourselves to anyone. Always be yourself.

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?

I would change the stigma related to HIV and AIDS. The LGBTQ+ community is so marginalized, and there is so much hate.

What is your greatest regret?

Not having enough time to do all the things I need to do in this life.

What adjectives best describe you?

Resilient, fastidious and persistent.

What drives you to do what you do?

A desire to help others—especially those who have HIV/AIDS, those in the gay community and survivors of sexual abuse and emotional abuse.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?

A cat, specifically a puma. They are worshiped and mysterious creatures.

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