Operation D-REK

Derek Canas raises HIV awareness from the DJ booth.

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At age 16, Derek Canas, of Brunswick, Georgia, stood 4 foot 1 and weighed 55 pounds and was much smaller than his peers. For years, his parents voiced concerns about his size, but doctors never seemed alarmed. It wasn't until 2001, when a medical student suggested he take an HIV test, that Canas learned that he had AIDS.

"My only knowledge of HIV at that point was a Nick News episode," says Canas, referring to the episode of the children's news program that featured basketball icon Magic Johnson. "I knew the word, knew it was medical and extremely deadly," recalls Canas, an HIV advocate and a DJ who performs as D-REK.

"I found out that I had wasting syndrome and was within months of death," he recalls of his teen health challenges. "I had no immune system."

At 3 months old, Canas had open-heart surgery. He was required to wear a pacemaker and received a blood transfusion. That's how he contracted HIV.

Luckily, Canas was diagnosed before it was too late, and he immediately began treatment. Prior to his diagnosis, Canas was taking a growth hormone. He grew to only 5 feet, and he continued experiencing problems with his weight.

Now 36 years old, Canas eats between 3,500 and 4,000 calories a day to maintain his weight and try to put on additional pounds. "I know people joke like it's so difficult to lose weight," he says. "But it's equally difficult to gain. I struggle with that daily."

HIV isn't his biggest health threat—his heart is. Canas is now on his fifth pacemaker. His heart has been shocked back into rhythm multiple times. "My heart is one of those things that can just start acting up," Canas explains.

In his early 30s, Canas read about people diagnosed with HIV later in life who seemed to be healthy. But that wasn't the case for him. As a result, he created the #EndTheStigma campaign in the hope that his story could give a voice to people with HIV who didn't feel seen or heard.

Despite his circumstances, Canas continues to push forward. His diagnosis has helped him take

risks, such as becoming a DJ. He has even advocated from the DJ booth. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, he wore his #EndTheStigma campaign shirts and wristbands while deejaying.

“A lot of friends knew my story,” he explains. “They would explain to people that would come in and might ask a question about it. I’m not a big dude, and it’s clearly visible when you meet me that I have health problems.”

With the help of his street team, Angels and Warriors, D-REK’s goal is to initiate discussions about HIV to educate people and eliminate stigma.

Canas encourages people to read his memoir, Operation D-REK, for a more detailed perspective on his unique life and health.

“You are not the words that are written in the medical folder,” Canas says. “You still get to choose what happens next. You still have the ability to fight and take it on headfirst. It doesn’t matter if every doctor you’ve seen says it’s not possible. I’m proof that you can break every rule in the book.”

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