Coming Out Again

POZ's new deputy editor Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr. bravely shares how he came out twice to his beloved Latino family—the first time as gay and the second time as HIV positive.

October 1, 2008 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

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I first came out as a senior in high school in 1987. I decided to tell my best friend that I was gay. I was too afraid to say it face-to-face, so I wrote him a letter and put it in his knapsack. It was a torturous few days before he found it, read it and processed the news. "It's OK," he said. Thankfully, we've remained close.

Taking that initial step and getting a good reaction was encouraging, but I knew that it was going to be a long time before I felt comfortable as an out gay man. It was many years before the majority of people in my life knew. I started outing myself as gay to friends and co-workers in college, but I didn't tell my parents or my sister until 1996.

To complicate the coming out process, I was diagnosed with HIV in 1992. Since then, I've told friends and boyfriends my status, but not my co-workers until a few years ago. I didn't disclose my HIV status to my parents or my sister until this year.

I'm still telling new people, even today. When I first shared my news, I had no understanding that coming out as gay—let alone HIV positive—is a never-ending process. No matter how "out" you think you are, there is always someone new to tell.

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My parents and my sister were born in Cuba. They immigrated to the United States in the late 1960s and made New York City their new home. As so many Cubans before them had done during that decade, they fled communism for a better life. Most of my father's family managed to leave Cuba; most of my mother's family stayed behind.

I was born in 1970 at Metropolitan Hospital near Spanish Harlem. As my father's only son, I was named after him. To this day, my family's nickname for me is Junior.

We lived in an apartment near 125th Street in Harlem with my paternal grandmother until 1979.

During those years, my uncle and his family lived downstairs; my aunt and cousins lived across the street; and many other visiting family members constantly rotated through our home.

I often visited my three male cousins who lived downstairs. Their mother frequently yelled at them to stop playing rough. Even though she wasn't reprimanding me, I was the one who cried. I was a sensitive child.

I didn't know the word "gay" at age 4, but even then I knew that I was gay. I preferred reading to roughhousing. I was obedient and loyal, much like a dog. (I suppose that explains my deep affinity for animals.) I also felt that being gay was something I shouldn't tell anyone.

In 1979, my parents bought a small house near JFK International Airport in Queens, New York and we moved. We were the first Latino family in the mostly Italian-American neighborhood. The first black family in the neighborhood had moved in across the street only a short while before us. We were living our version of the American Dream.

During my adolescence, I learned the word "gay" and knew it described me perfectly. I believed then that it was the worst thing anyone could ever be. My family, friends and society disapproved of homosexuality, and their direct and indirect condemnation of gay people started to overwhelm me.

My Roman Catholic guilt and the inherent machismo of Latino culture further stoked my own homophobia. I tried dating women in high school and college, but it never felt right. I joined the U.S. Marines Corps Reserve in part to find a solution to my sexuality.

While at New York University in 1991 in my senior year of undergraduate school, I was called to active duty. I was to be sent to the Gulf War. I went to Camp Pendleton in California to prepare for the ground invasion, but the land war lasted only 100 hours. I never went to the Persian Gulf. When I got home, I returned to college part-time until I graduated in 1992. I was proud to have done my duty for my country.

The Marine Corps also did its duty and tested me for HIV. Under a provision that makes HIV testing mandatory in the Marines, I was tested and the result was negative in 1991—the same year that both the red AIDS ribbon was born and Magic Johnson was diagnosed with HIV. When they tested me again in 1992, I was positive. It was the same year Freddie Mercury died of AIDS-related complications. At the time, early anti-HIV drugs such as AZT had become available, but there was still a strong likelihood that I would die of AIDS.

It was an early Sunday morning, the day after my 22nd birthday, when my commanding officer informed me that I was HIV positive. As cold as it may seem, having Uncle Sam give me the news was strangely comforting. The officer literally read from a script, but it was surprisingly tactful. A physician was present to answer my medical questions. I didn't ask him any. He couldn't answer the only question I had—"Why me?"

The day I found out I was HIV positive I told my best friend from high school—after all, he was the first person I told about being gay. This time, I told him in person. His reaction this time was sadness. We sat silently for a long time.

The day I found out I was HIV positive I also decided that I would spare my parents the disgrace of having a “degenerate” for a son; I would go away to die alone. At the time, I was living with my parents, but I moved out the following year. Fully expecting to die well before the age of 30, I learned a new way to live—I didn’t plan for tomorrow; I lived only for today. In the years since, I’ve learned to plan for tomorrow, but I still live for today.

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I met Michael in 1990 after a summer away from home at a Marine Corps training school. I had gone through basic training the summer before. I was in the best shape of my life.

Michael was handsome, but what appealed to me was that he was an average guy. He adored me. He was a devout Roman Catholic and a successful businessman. I fell in love with him. He told me he was HIV negative, but he lied. He didn’t admit to me that he was HIV positive until 1993.

When I tested negative in 1991, I believed that I’d been absolved for the risky behavior I’d had in the past. I had just returned from active military duty physically unharmed, but mentally wounded. Because I felt both invincible and vulnerable, I let down my guard with Michael.

When I tested positive in 1992, Michael and I were no longer together; I had been with a new boyfriend for about a year just before the test. We didn’t always use protection because we both believed we were negative. When I tested positive for HIV, I had just broken up with the new boyfriend for a woman who I believed was going to make me straight.

My family was completely unaware that my life had become like a telenovela. I told the newly minted ex-boyfriend about my HIV status in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village, New York. He was horrified at first for what it might mean for him, but he quickly shifted his attention to my plight. Mercifully, he tested negative. I wrote a letter to the woman I was seeing, explaining that I had tested positive for HIV, but she wasn’t deterred by my status. Regardless, my foray into heterosexuality was brief.

Soon after I moved away from home in 1993, I started falling apart emotionally. Struggling with my demons about being gay and HIV positive in addition to hiding these truths from my family weighed heavily on my mind. By 1994, I was in a major clinical depression.

Michael died in 1994 of AIDS-related complications, adding profound grief to my list of woes. His death only increased my fear that I would soon get sick and die.

I slowly recovered from my major clinical depression by the end of 1994. As I got better, I discovered that I had had dysthymia (chronic, mild depression) ever since early childhood.

Learning to deal with dysthymia reduced the intensity of my internal issues, a skill that was—and continues to be—a blessing.

I think of Michael all the time. I forgave him long ago for lying to me about his HIV status. I was at least as responsible as he was for what happened. I now understand intimately his fear of rejection. It's happened to me too many times.

I had no long-term relationships in the following two years, mostly because others feared my HIV. "It's not you, it's the virus," they said. Even today, those words still sting.

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Only two years after recovering from my major clinical depression, I found myself slipping into another one. Apparently, the root causes of what was bothering me had not been addressed. This time, my parents noticed I was becoming emotionally distant.

I finally realized that not being out to my family was contributing to my depression. So, with three simple words—"Yo soy homosexual" ("I am gay")—I came out to my parents in 1996. I spoke with them in Spanish as a sign of respect. It took me a few visits before I found the right moment. It was even more difficult than I expected. Tears were plentiful—on both sides.

My sister had moved far away a few years before with her husband and my nephews. I didn't want to wait to tell her in person because I wanted my parents to be able to talk with her about it. I mailed her a letter telling her that I am gay and followed up with a phone call.

It took years for my parents and my sister to grow accustomed to the idea of my being gay. It took me years to adjust to them knowing that I was gay. It was a delicate dance for us all.

I made a conscious decision not to disclose my HIV status at the same time that I told my family about my being gay. I believed that the news that I am gay would be difficult enough. Although I postponed sharing my HIV status with them mostly for that reason, I also believed that there was no point in telling them. I was pretty sure I would be dead in a few years anyway.

As the years passed and I continued to be well, I began to accept that I was going to live. I started a career in publishing. I got a master's degree. I had two long-term relationships. I got Bailey, a toy fox terrier that wins over everyone she meets. I traveled, including a visit to the Libyan desert in 2006 with my ex-partner to witness a full eclipse of the sun. I've now raised my expectations of survival to the point of believing that I'll die an old man.

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In the last two years, my personal growth has continued into a new long-term relationship and new professional opportunities. To sustain it (i.e., preserve my sanity), I realized that finally it was time to come out again.

“Yo soy VIH positivo.” With those words (“I’m HIV positive”), I came out to my parents again in 2008. For this second act of disclosure, I decided to speak with them in Spanish, as I had when sharing the news that I’m gay. It again took me a few visits before I found the right moment.

I didn’t anticipate that telling my parents would be so anticlimactic. I expected a repeat of the emotional encounter of my first coming out, but instead serenity ruled. My parents and I handled it with grace. Perhaps it was prudent not to tell them early on, but I clearly didn’t have to wait as long as I did.

Like before, I didn’t want to wait to tell my sister in person, but this time I skipped the letter and just called her. I didn’t anticipate how difficult the conversation would be without the ability to share a smile or a hug, but we got through it.

I am sure it will take years for my family to adjust to the news that I am HIV positive, but already there are signs that this time it will be easier for them. It already is for me.

Sometimes I wonder how my life would have been different if I had come out sooner about being gay or being HIV positive. What if I had come out about both at the same time? Whether it would have been better is something that I’ll never know.

Knowing what I know now, however, I believe I would have been happier if I’d shared all my news sooner with my loved ones. While I can’t change the past, I can learn from it. Coming out—about any truth at any time—can improve your life. The truth indeed can set you free.

Editor’s Note: Gutierrez is currently editor-in-chief of POZ. Visit his blog at blogs.poz.com/oriol for more on his life. (Clic aquí para leer este artículo en español.)

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