POZ at 15

A look back at some of the defining moments in the magazine's illustrious (and sometimes notorious) history.

May 1, 2009 By Jennifer Morton

In 2003, when I first started working at *POZ*, I immediately knew that I had found a very special place. I'd worked at several other publications—but none could compare to *POZ*. The *POZ* staff has the unique challenge of creating a magazine for a widely diverse group of people linked only by a virus. But I quickly discovered that our readers share much more than HIV—they also share the will to survive and thrive.

Since the magazine's launch in 1994, the staff has also shared a common bond—a passion and a committment to doing everything we can in the fight against HIV/AIDS. As with any company, we've had our ups and downs, moments of unbridled laughter as well as occasional tears. But we always unite in our mission of trying to empower, educate and inspire our readers.

Here, we take a peek inside the daily life of the magazine that many (at least in the publishing industry) were shocked to see hit the stands. Undoubtedly, in this recap we missed many important milestones. So we'd like to invite those of you who have worked at, contributed to, appeared in or read the magazine to share your memories with us by adding a comment below. Please help us fill in any gaps and tell us why *POZ* is special to you. Because we think you'll agree that there's no place like *POZ*.

1994

January–March – Sean Strub conceived *POZ* in 1993; the first issue of the magazine was created in Strub's West Village loft. It was edited by Richard Perez-Feria and designed by J.C. Suares. It featured mostly Strub's friends and people he knew through his activism. Strub and his then-partner Xavier Morales lived in one part of the loft; the *POZ* office was in the other. (Shortly before the first issue premiered, the *POZ* offices moved to the second floor of the same building.) Strub and Morales often answered the *POZ* phone off-hours—sometimes in the middle of the night—to take subscription requests, answer questions or help someone who was newly diagnosed overcome his or her fears.

April/May – The magazine's first issue featured Ty Ross, the gay, HIV-positive grandson of conservative political icon Barry Goldwater. Fashion/celebrity photographer Greg Gorman took the

photos of Ross, and *Vanity Fair* journalist Kevin Sessums interviewed him. The Associated Press covered *POZ*'s premier issue by reporting that Goldwater's grandson "posed nude for a gay magazine." Not exactly the press we were looking for.

August – *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich wrote an editorial that captured what we were really about—saving the lives of people with HIV.

1995

January – *POZ*'s printer refused to print the February/March issue because it contained an image of former *Playgirl* model Thom Collins that they deemed "pornographic." Our editors had to quickly redesign the page with a less "offensive" image. (Ironically, the same printer also printed *Playboy*; *POZ* soon switched to a less hypocritical printer.)

February – *Adweek* included *POZ* on its list of hip magazines that had, according to them, "larger-than-life influence." (Other publications included: *Ray Gun*, *Nickelodeon*, *Might* and *Lingua Franca*.)

April – Activist Larry Kramer made his *POZ* cover debut on our first anniversary issue and was interviewed by Andrew Sullivan. Two years later, the tables were turned when Sullivan appeared on the April 1997 cover—interviewed by Kramer. Both were shot by photographer Albert Watson, whose studio and home were a few steps from the *POZ* office.

June/July – *POZ* published "A Polka-dot Dilly," a children's story written back in the '60s by Strub's Aunt Kitty and illustrated by his mother, Janey, about a little boy who is covered head to toe with mysterious spots. Strub remembered the story because he was covered with spots of his own in the form of AIDS-related KS lesions.

1996

February – The late, great treatment activist Kiyoshi Kuromiya smoked a joint at his cover photo shoot. Let's hope he had a prescription.

April – David Drake (writer/star of the hit play *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, which Strub produced) was hired as editor-in-chief.

June – The first POZ Life Expo, a consumer trade show for people with HIV, was held in New York City and attracted more than 7,000 people over two days. It hit the road the following year traveling to cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle and Houston.

July – Art Bar, Tortilla Flats and Baby Buddha were local staff hangouts, but the "company cafeteria" became Florent, the restaurant owned by HIV-positive Florent Morellet, who was profiled in our second issue. Many of his customers were aware of his status because he posted his CD4 counts on the restaurant's menu board.

November – Sean Strub's dog, Willy, and Stephen Gendin's Jack Russell terrier, Zoom, had free reign over the *POZ* offices. They even made the masthead—as "office security."

1997

March – Dick Scanlan became the acting editor-in-chief (he and David Drake were listed on the masthead as editors-at-large). Scanlan had starred with Drake in *Pageant* and had written a critically acclaimed novel titled *Does Freddy Dance*. He was later nominated for a Tony Award for the book of the Broadway show *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

April – *POZ* was a finalist in the General Excellence category of the National Magazine Awards.

Summer – *POZ en Español* (with all original content) was launched with Gonzalo Aburto as its editor. Despite being well-received, the magazine folded in 2003 because of lack of advertising support for the Latino content.

August – Elizabeth Taylor agreed to an interview with *POZ*, and she became the first HIV-negative person on the cover. British writer (and porn star) Aiden Shaw was invited to guest edit the issue that focused on AIDS in the United Kingdom. Taylor's interview, conducted by Kevin Sessums, was one of the first she gave after recovering from brain surgery. Taylor's close friend Roddy McDowall photographed her exclusively for *POZ* in exchange for a modest fee and a listing as a contributing photographer on the masthead.

December – Writer Mark O'Donnell penned his final AIDS Zen column for the magazine. The column had been a regular staple in *POZ* since the very first issue. O'Donnell went on to win (with Thomas Meehan) the Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical for *Hairspray*. The duo also wrote the 2007 film.

1998

March –Walter Armstrong was named editor-in-chief.

May – Renowned artist John Dugdale photographed his friend, performance artist John Kelly, for the cover. Dugdale, a former commercial photographer with clients such as Ralph Lauren, had lost much of his sight to AIDS-related CMV retinitis.

June – Rebekka Armstrong, a former *Playboy* Playmate (September 1986), became a *POZ* cover and centerfold. *POZ* later put Jeffrey Jenest, the HIV- positive executive vice president of Playboy Entertainment, on its June 2007 cover.

July – Joseph Sonnabend, Strub's personal physician, became the first (and only) doctor featured on a POZ cover. The interview was the first (and only) cover story written by Strub.

September – *POZ* published an issue on youth and HIV and enclosed a free condom in each

copy. Barnes & Noble threatened to stop carrying *POZ* and pulled the back-to-school issue from its shelves. After a few days of bad press, B&N CEO Leonard Riggio met with Strub and Gendin; he agreed to continue stocking the magazine.

October – *POZ* received *Crain's New York* third annual Small Business Award.

1999

March – Olympic diver Greg Louganis became the first professional swimmer on our cover. The second was Jack Mackenroth (April 2008) of *Project Runway* fame. POZ has also featured a pro basketball player (Magic Johnson, June/July 1996) and two professional boxers (Lamar Parks, June/July 1995, and Tommy Morrison, July 1997). Today, Morrison claims that his original HIV test was a false positive; there is still some question as to whether he is, in fact, living with HIV.

July – Phill Wilson (executive director of the Black AIDS Institute) guest edited an issue focused on Africa. Only two other issues have had guest editors: the British issue in 1997, edited by aforementioned writer/adult film actor Aiden Shaw, and a special edition called Pandemic in 2003 edited by documentarian Rory Kennedy and book publisher Nan Richardson. That issue featured Kennedy's award-winning HBO film, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*.

2000

May – HIV denialists from ACT UP San Francisco protested at the *POZ* office, attacking with Silly String and tossing flyers around the reception desk. *POZ*'s alleged offense? Allowing ourselves to be influenced by the pharmaceutical industry. Guess ACT UP missed our April issue, which was entirely devoted to alternative therapies.

July – Stephen Gendin, *POZ* cofounder, contributing editor, AIDS activist, friend, hero and mentor, suddenly died. The staff gathered together and shared recollections of Stephen; soon "WWSD" (for "What Would Stephen Do?") became a mantra at *POZ* when facing a difficult decision. His memorial was held at the LGBT Community Center on Little West 12th Street. *POZ* published a special issue about Gendin and his legacy with four different covers: one with a picture of Gendin the activist, another with Gendin and his beloved Zoom, one of Gendin naked on a beach and one of Gendin's body, cold and still, at the morgue.

2001

April – A lull in the drug development pipeline coupled with a decline of HIV-product marketing led to diminished ad revenues, which resulted in significant layoffs at *POZ*. Our survivor instinct kicked in as the remaining editors pulled together to produce the magazine and worked with the sales team to develop new and unique educational products. ComboCards anyone?

April – The POZ Life Expos evolved into a multicity tour of educational seminars called the POZ Life Forums. The Forums featured a game show based on the popular TV program *Who Wants to*

Be a Millionaire.

August – *POZ* moved to less expensive digs in the heart of the Meatpacking District on Little West 12th Street.

September – *POZ* gave death its due by dedicating the entire September issue to the topic. The cover featured the art of Barton Benes, who often worked with the ashes of people who had been cremated. Unfortunately, just as the magazine was arriving in subscribers' mailboxes, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were hit in the 9/11 terrorist attack. From our office rooftop, *POZ* staffers watched the towers fall.

2002

October – *POZ* held a Halloween party extravaganza at Lips, a NYC drag restaurant, in honor of comptroller Dennis Daniel's 10-year anniversary of working with Strub. Daniel is the only staff member who has consistently been with the magazine since the very beginning. (And none of us knows what we'd do without him.)

December – On World AIDS Day, several *POZ* staffers spoke with the inmates at New York's Mid-State Correctional Facility. By this time, ex-prisoner Laura Whitehorn had joined the editorial team and become *POZ*'s prison expert. In August of 2004, the staff threw her a party to celebrate the five-year anniversary of her release!

December – HIV-positive activist Dawn Averitt Bridge appeared on our cover with Maddy, her HIV-negative baby. Averitt loved the cover but noted that we misprinted Maddy's birthday. Luckily we got it right for her second baby, Sophia, born in 2004.

2003

April – *POZ* put famed photographer Herb Ritts on the cover following his death from "complications due to pneumonia." Though the openly gay Ritts never publicly disclosed his HIV status, it was an open secret in Hollywood. The cover story questioned why the mainstream media never mentioned the "A" word in connection with the death of the 50-year-old artist.

Fall – *POZ* published *Meds Health*—a special issue on long-term treatment, which was designed as a spoof of the popular health and fitness magazine. *Men's Health* publisher Rodale enjoyed the joke but politely told us not to do it again.

October – Freelancer (and future managing editor) Jennifer Morton got stuck in the elevator during her first week on the job. Though the episode was a bit traumatic, she eventually escaped and decided to stick around. The elevator continued to be far less reliable than "Mama" Morton.

December – Prison peer educator Kathy Boudin came to the office to answer staffers' questions

about HIV behind bars. Boudin had recently been released after 22 years in a New York state women's prison. *POZ* and many others in the HIV community supported her campaign for release because of her groundbreaking work with those who were living with HIV in prison.

2004

February – For our 10th anniversary issue, Strub came up with the idea to have Spencer Tunick (an artist known for his large installations of naked people) shoot a cover with HIV-positive individuals gathered at Florent. The rest, as they say, is history. The making of the cover was captured in the award-winning HBO documentary *Positively Naked*.

August – Chloe Dzubilo became the first transgendered woman on a *POZ* cover when she appeared with nine other HIV-positive individuals for a story on facial wasting in September 2002. She then bared it all as part of our 10th anniversary cover. So when we decided to do an entire feature on HIV in the transgendered community, we knew Chloe had to be our cover girl.

September – In his final publisher's letter, Brad Peebles wrote about using the cancer drug hydroxyurea, an experimental treatment for *HIV*. The following month, the magazine ran a feature story on the drug. During his five years at *POZ*, Peebles discussed many of his treatment experiences in his publisher's letters.

September – *POZ* moved into our current office space in Midtown across from Bryant Park. The company had recently been sold to CDM Publishing, which expanded our website (POZ.com)and the company's technical capabilities.

Winter – *Real Health*, The Guide to Black Wellness was created to address the need for information about HIV in the African-American community.

2005

Valentine's Day – POZ Personals was launched. Today, more than 76,000 members look for that special someone on POZ.com.

September – *POZ* joined forces with Housing Works and the Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP) to promote the Campaign to End AIDS (C2EA). The campaign's mission is to create a nationwide network of grassroots AIDS activists.

September – After nearly 10 years, Walter Armstrong bid adieu to the magazine. His farewell fête at Florent was a night to remember. Angelo Ragaza became the interim editor-in-chief after Armstrong's departure.

October – Former senior editor Leroy Whitfield died of HIV-related kidney disease. Whitfield was one of the nation's leading journalists on HIV in the black community. *POZ* joined a broad community of support at his memorial.

2006

January – Longtime "Anonymous" columnist Regan Hofmann was hired as editor-in-chief. She disclosed her HIV status to the world by appearing on the April cover and subsequently told her story in *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, *New York* magazine and on *Good Morning America*, CNN and NPR.

February – *POZ*'s parent company acquired AIDSmeds.com from founder Peter Staley, cinching the company's treatment expertise. (AIDSmeds' current president, Tim Horn, was once a science editor at *POZ*.)

May – *POZ* held Love Out Loud, its first fund-raiser for AIDS Walk New York. The event was such a hit that it continues to this day—in 2007, a West Coast version was held for AIDS Walk Los Angeles.

September – "Positoid" Shawn Decker and wife-partner Gwenn Barringer appeared on the cover. This marked Shawn's fourth *POZ* cover—more than anyone else in our 15-year history.

October – Hofmann and staffer Marvelyn Brown appeared with several other HIV-positive women and *POZ* coverboy Magic Johnson on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as part of a program on HIV/AIDS in America.

2007

July – Lights! Camera! Action! POZ.com expanded its coverage to include video interviews at the fourth International AIDS Society Conference in Sydney. The POZ and AIDSmeds editors continue to travel the globe to provide readers with up-to- date treatment info.

July/August – Hofmann journeyed to Taiwan, Vietnam and Australia as part of the U.S. State Department's Speakers Bureau to talk about fighting stigma. Media coverage about her visit to an orphanage in Taiwan piqued the interest of prominent officials; as a result, the orphanage, which had been in danger of losing its housing, secured its lease.

September – And the Freddie Award goes to...POZ.com. The International Health and Medical Media Awards recognized our website in the Infectious Diseases category.

November – *Tu Salud,* the Guide to Latino Health, was created. The following year, POZ's deputy editor Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr. was hired to oversee *Tu Salud* and the Spanish-language content on POZ.com.

2008

Spring – Hofmann appeared in a Kenneth Cole ad in its campaign titled "We All Walk in Different Shoes." It celebrated the brand's 25th anniversary and "focused on individuals who live their lives

in a non-uniform way—either by their own choice or circumstance."

April – *POZ* signed a 10-year agreement with the National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA) to jointly build NAPWA's membership to give the HIV community an independent, representative voice on Capitol Hill.

June – Hofmann served as the first HIV-positive member of the U.S. delegation to UNGASS, the United Nation's biannual global meeting on HIV/AIDS.

October – POZ.com won the MM&M Award for the best health care online media brand, besting WebMD and proving that size really doesn't matter.

October – *POZ* dedicated its entire issue to the notion of what a national AIDS strategy should look like.

World AIDS Day – *POZ* presented Bacharach to the Future, a fund-raising event for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, in which stars performed Burt Bacharach songs. Isn't that what friends are for?

2009

January – *POZ* staffers bonded together in the conference room to witness the historic inauguration of President Barack Obama. Flag cupcakes were enjoyed by all. Hope (and a collective sugar high) abounds.

January – Jethro, a chimp used for medical research, became the January cover subject and marked the seventh time that an animal has been on the *POZ* cover. The other six: Elizabeth Taylor's dog, Sugar, November 1997; the bareback horse, February 1999; Greg Louganis's dog, Nipper, March 1999; Stephen Gendin's dog, Zoom; a random dog in drag, July/August 2003; and the horses behind the Stirling family, January/February 2008.

March – POZ.com is a finalist for editorial excellence in min's Best of the Web awards. Upon learning that *Sports Illustrated* won the award, our editors envision a *POZ* swimsuit issue...

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